The ethical and practical implications of systems architecture on identity in networked learning: a constructionist perspective

Marguerite L. Koole\textsuperscript{a*} and Gale Parchoma\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Centre for Distance Education, Athabasca University, Edmonton, Alberta T5J 3S8, Canada; \textsuperscript{b}Centre for the Study of Advanced Learning Technologies, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, UK

(Received 4 March 2011; final version received 30 May 2011)

Through relational dialogue, learners shape their identities by sharing information about the world and how they see themselves in it. As learners interact, they receive feedback from both the environment and other learners which, in turn, helps them assess and adjust their self-presentations. Although learners retain choice and personal agency, even the most neutral-seeming technological environment may encourage some ways of interacting whilst discouraging others. Taking a constructionist perspective, the authors first compare peer-to-peer interaction in online and face-to-face environments. Online self-presentation is adjusted using identity management tools. These tools may provide efficient ways to locate and interact with other learners as well as protection mechanisms for personal information. In particular, the authors discuss the effects of anonymity and pseudonymity on trust and social capital. To illustrate these concepts, the authors discuss two social networking systems, \textit{iHelp} and \textit{The Landing}, and how their underlying architectures may affect discourse and identity management. Throughout, there remains a tension between the individual self versus the self as part of a social group. The authors recommend careful consideration of the effects of systems architecture on both the individual and the community — thereby balancing the needs of the individual with her learning communities. From an ethical standpoint, only then can both individual and community flourish online.

**Keywords:** networked learning; social networking technologies; identity; constructionism; ethics

Introduction

As social networking technologies, such as \textit{Facebook}, \textit{Ning}, and \textit{Moodle}, become widely available, their pedagogical potential is increasingly apparent. Alongside static, non-interactive resources often still delivered through these systems, online learners may share ideas, construct solutions, and collaborate on projects together. While these potential affordances are impressive, it is necessary to acknowledge the ethical issues imposed by such technologies. The once clear boundaries between electronic learning environments and other aspects of the learners’ lifeworlds can become blurred, allowing a blending in which previously separated roles and identities may collide or morph. This blurring of boundaries has facilitated increased
issues of data security, identity theft, loss of privacy, and alienation (Exploring online research methods in a virtual training environment, 2006; Kitchin, 2007). In addition to these problems, the online world, once seen as freeing learners from conformance to social pressures, may now undermine this freedom as new status hierarchies and dominance patterns are re-established. To some extent, the tension between the Cartesian view of self-as-individual and the more holistic concept of the self as part of a community may be exacerbated. In response, educational technologists have developed systems that provide mechanisms for anonymity and pseudonymity, yet promote meaningful and open dialogue. However, biases inherent in social networking technologies influence how learners can interact, the strategies they choose to manage their identities, and how they ultimately construct knowledge. In this article, we briefly discuss how philosophical and ethical stances on technological and pedagogical design may impact identity and learning from a constructionist perspective. A constructionist perspective is defined as an ontological stance in which “knowledge and identities” are perceived as being “constructed in discourses that categorize the world and bring phenomenon into sight” (Talja, Touimen, & Savolainen, 2005, p. 82). In light of this discussion on knowledge- and identity-construction, we examine two educational social networking systems, iHelp and The Landing, for ethical and practical implications of their underlying architectures on learners’ abilities to manage their learning and their identities. These two systems approach identity management in different ways, and an examination of these differences will demonstrate the potential impact upon how individuals present themselves, form ties, and manage the balance between their needs as individuals and the needs of the community.

**Philosophy of technology and constructionism**

In networked learning, technology enables learners to establish connections with other learners, teachers, and resources (Ferreday, Hodgson, & Jones, 2006; Hodgson & Watland, 2004). As such networked learning is highly relational in nature (Jones, Dirkinck-Holmfeld, & Lindstrom, 2006), Jones et al. (2006) oppose dualist and relativist conceptions of affordances, suggesting that technologies do not possess affordances that exist outside of human perception nor are affordances solely constructions of the mind; rather, “affordances occur in relationships with active agents or actants” (p. 51). In this stance, the work of Jones et al. (2006) aligns with Oliver’s (2005) definition of affordances as a dialogical space where “how people ‘write’ (design, create) technology intersects with how people ‘read’ (use and apply) technology” (p. 412). This orientation emphasizes the role of discourse. “Discourses are composed of signs but they do more than designate things, for they are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Sarup, 1996, p. 71). In the constructionist sense, an individual and her world are constructed through reciprocal exchange of information (Ferreday et al., 2006; Hodgson & Watland, 2004). This reflexively constructed social world is the foundation of one’s self-perception (Cooley, 1922; Goffman, 1959; Koole, 2010).

Whilst determinists (who posit that technology determines actions) and instrumentalists (who posit that human agency determines actions) view technology as neutral (Feenburg, 1999; Parchoma, 2011), the relational, constructionist orientation holds that technology is value-laden. On the surface, technologies may appear morally neutral (Brey, 2000) as if their design and uses are “purely technical,
even inevitable” (Feenburg, 1999, p. 35). However, technologies “embed and foster cultural values” (Ess, 2002, p. 237) including “paradigms of use, interpersonal expectations, and social norms” (boyd, 2002, p. 12), each of which influences perceived affordances and constraints. Technology and social needs reify each other in an ongoing discourse. Although the impact might be “tempered . . . by the values and communicative preferences of those who take up the new technologies” (Ess, 2002, p. 237), the ethical implications of the embedded properties are relative to the culture in which the technology is enacted (Brey, 2000). When diverse cultures meet, the resolution of opposing viewpoints may result in the subordination of some practices to others.

**Online versus face-to-face learning**

Face-to-face interaction is often described as a superior mode of communication because of its greater richness of cues (Cocking, 2008; Matthews, 2008). In a dualistic, Cartesian sense, this is often attributed to online disembodiment and control over appearances through careful crafting of messages (Ess, 2002). This control makes it difficult to access character and dispositional information normally conveyed by the human face or body (Pettit, 2008). In contrast to the online-disembodiment view, Michelfelder (2000) argues that “the ‘virtual’ presents itself not as an alternative to, but rather as a modality of the ‘real’. To make something virtual is not to make the physical side of that something disappear” (p. 151). Logically, then, virtual discourse is based on real characteristics and has real-life effects. The online self is connected to the physical self. Cues embedded in writing style, idiomatic expressions, and knowledge, for example, have roots in one’s acculturation and daily experience.

If one can assume that in online there is a narrative of self (or selves) that extends to aspects of the offline world, and that the self is generated through dialogue, then there must be some level of relationship with varying degrees of intimacy amongst online discourse participants. “An intimate relation is one in which significant others are cowriters of the self-narrative” (Matthews, 2008, p. 148). Open disclosure and conveyance of subtle traits can enhance intimacy. Text-based environments present a challenge in that non-voluntary information to which an actor may be indifferent, unaware, or wish to hide is less easily conveyed in text-based environments (Matthews, 2008). The discrepancies between voluntary and non-voluntary acts can help interactants interpret character (Cocking, 2008). Spelling and grammatical errors, for example, may betray level of education. Similarly, references to material goods may betray socio-economic status.

By controlling some of the information they provide and crafting careful presentations of self, individuals can attempt to mitigate intimacy – the influence of others on their own thoughts and identities. In this way, the individual can partially manage the social feedback process, by only intentionally providing certain cues. He or she can therefore influence the types of responses and judgments of others through personal identity management. Ongoing interaction over time, however, may allow inconsistencies in information and performance to become apparent, affecting the pace of relationship formation and the intensity with which participants engage in message decoding (Mabry, 2001). The fewer the number of cues, the more work others must do in order to decode or understand an identity. In environments in which the cues seem limited or different from those in face-to-face environments,
self-presentation and expectations may be unrealistic, self-disclosure fast-tracked, messages carefully optimized, and risk-taking increased if accountability for disclosure appears low (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). For example, whilst some members of online bereavement groups may share highly intimate details of their experiences soon after joining the group, others may withhold or carefully edit their personal narratives. Those who are more open can increase the pace and intimacy while lessening the need for others to decode their identities.

Some research has shown online environments to offer greater intimacy (Kitchin, 2007), leading to hyperpersonal communications (Walther, 1996). Ferreday and Hodgson (2008) have even noted how “rigid invocation of community norms” online may lead to stigmatization of those who do not conform (p. 654). So, while online cues might be different from those used in face-to-face environments, they are equally important in online human interaction and may result in similar behavior patterns (Rusman, Van Bruggen, Sloep, Valcke, & Koper, 2010).

In both face-to-face and online situations, individuals may show different facets of the self or enact different presentation strategies (Koole, 2010). Such presentation even might be more controlled online and might lack identity transitions between contexts as learners log on-and-off intermittently, sometimes switching pseudonyms. An individual may use different names, display different visuals, and share different histories and opinions in different settings. The different personas used in different networks may never be associated. However, within a given network, intermittent, non-fluid performances might lead to an assumption that the online self is more fragmented (boyd, 2002). Fragmentation might also be inferred in cases in which an individual’s different personas from different networks are matched. However, the stability of one’s character is mediated over time by a continual negotiation between what Ricoeur (1992) refers to as idem (continuity of narrative) and ipse (self as different from community) (Atkins, 2004). On the surface, visible actions either prove or disprove one’s stated identity. Below the surface, “every person’s identity is a site of struggle between conflicting discourses … And, in the struggle of discourses, not only words change meanings, but identities also” (Sarup, 1996, p. 73). This site of struggle may stimulate critical reflection in the way that troublesome knowledge and “threshold concepts” lead to new understanding (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 374). Experiences and actions inform viewpoints and behaviors in relation to one’s evolving disposition, values, and circumstances (Atkins, 2004). In this way, the struggle of discourse can lead to a greater understanding of self.

Identity, trust, and social capital

Ongoing interaction depends on trust. “Trust refers to a subjective level of probability in which one agent will perform a particular action in a particular context” (Daniel, McCalla, & Schwier, 2002, p. 7). It involves a “dynamic reliance” within the context of a relationship (Pettit, 2008, p. 163). Smith (2008) describes this as an “interdependence of the self with others” (p. 328). The degree of trust is based upon appearance (personality traits and character), reputation (recommendations and references), and performance (Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Rusman et al., 2010). To this, we would add that context will also affect degree of trust. For example, one would expect certain behaviors from members of a professional network such as LinkedIn than what one would expect from members of a less formal network such as Facebook or MySpace. The expectation that the member of the professional
network will not share embarrassing party photos – betrayal of or adherence to this expectation is likely to shape the trust experience. Previous experiences may affect how individuals rate the importance of these dimensions (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). As a result, individuals’ levels of willingness to communicate information on personal appearance (e.g. use an avatar rather than a photo) to provide reputation information (such as links to recommendations or associations) or to describe past performances in relative knowledge areas tend to vary.

The paradox of trust suggests that in order for trust to develop, it must be perceived to already exist (Smith, 2008). In new communities, it is not always possible to rely on reputation or prior behavior. Often, participants must take a leap of faith by actively choosing to bracket their discomfort thereby allowing interaction to take place (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Over the long term, trust is inferred from congruency and consistency of actions (Mabry, 2001). Inconsistency may be interpreted as deception (Matthews, 2008) while it may also indicate a change in opinion or spontaneity.

According to Jones et al. (2006), spontaneity is essential to the development of trust. Systems that increase risk of personal accountability, identifiability, and intrusive observation discourage spontaneous interaction thereby robbing participants of freedom of expression and authenticity – replacing it with adherence to norms. In private, anonymous environments, learners can express their emotions and opinions freely. Furthermore, Anwar and Greer (2008b) suggest that systems that support the separation of identity and activity can release learners from being “mis-defined and judged out of context” (p. 334). For example, a student who performs poorly in mathematics may wish to prevent the proliferation of a reputation of being a poor student which might bias instructors of other subjects. Further, identification as a part of the group rather than as an identifiable individual can lessen inhibitions and intentional identity management (Mabry, 2001, p. 10). A student who wishes to ask a seemingly simple question may be less reluctant if he can prevent being singled out as the student who asked the “stupid” question. However, such techniques might instead lead to less trust, less critical self-reflection, and less concern for and accountability toward others. As such students might not take the initiative to solve problems before seeking assistance.

Alternative views of privacy provide an interesting counterpoint to the proposition that low risk systems enhance communication. Privacy is “relational and social in nature and value” (Cocking, 2008, p. 138). It allows individuals to control information about themselves. Privacy enables secrecy, deception, reticence, and non-acknowledgement (Cocking, 2008, p. 133). Even in face-to-face environments, it is not possible to avoid divulgence of information; perceptions and interpretations of non-voluntary information are difficult to control. But, the choice of how to use that information offers an opportunity for peers to show respect and trustworthiness – or not. Confession, discretion, and reciprocity by their very enactment, change the overall social context in a relational sense: “An individual’s personal intentions influence the community, and the community influences the personal intentions of the individuals” (Schwier & Daniel, 2008, p. 353). A show of trustworthiness may build trust across the community.

Trust, reputation, and esteem can be aggregated across situations into an overall impression (Brennan & Pettit, 2008). These are elements of a broader concept, social capital. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) define social capital as “the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit” (p. 243).
Accumulation of social capital affects the ability of interactants to share understanding and construct knowledge (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003). Although it is not clear if social capital must exist prior to trust or vice-versa (compare Smith (2008) with Daniel et al., 2003), the benefits to the individual of social capital depends on her relationships and identifiability within the community (Daniel et al., 2003). Anonymity and pseudonymity may, then, negatively interfere with identification as a trusted member of a group.

Anonymity and pseudonymity

Through cues such as tone, grammar, organization of ideas, and self-disclosure, online message behaviors can be used to strategically manage impressions and interpret performances. Participants can attempt to control impressions through use of dramaturgical strategies such as those outlined in the Web of Identity model: technology, structure, power, culture, and personal-agency (Koole, 2010). For such strategies to be effective, the participant must continuously try to resolve understanding of the effects and interpretations of enacted strategies upon the other participants (Koole, 2010). Because it is not possible to fully and accurately assess the impact of these strategies, interaction involves risk. Returning to the example of the student who wishes to ask a seemingly simple question, lack of response, a curt response, or an excessively long response may be interpreted variously as unworthy-of-response, you should know better, or condescension. Equally possible, the student may interpret such responses in positive ways. However, expressing one’s lack of knowledge, revealing one’s writing style, and disclosure of personal characteristics all carry risk. The only way to completely avoid such risk is to be anonymous – that is, to not interact (Mabry, 2001). Though an anonymous individual can still benefit from one-way observation of others’ interactions, lack of reciprocity would impair the development of social capital, exclude her from many of its benefits, and possibly prevent the acquisition of needed information (Daniel et al., 2003).

Anonymity is a state in which a subject has no known history or reputation. An individual operating under a pseudonym, on the other hand, may have a history and reputation within the specific context in which the pseudonym is used (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Pseudonyms may be used to actively segment audiences. This practice allows individuals to present information that will garner approval from some audiences whilst avoiding consequences of disapproval from others (boyd, 2002; Brennan & Pettit, 2008). To illustrate, an individual may hold several accounts in a given online network. One account may be accessible only to friends to whom the individual exposes a funny, sarcastic, or silly persona. In another account, the individual might portray the reactionary political activist. A third account might be used by the job-seeking persona, a context in which sarcasm, silliness, and strong political views may be potentially harmful. In some cases, pseudonyms can be discarded if problems arise. The political activist persona might be deleted when authorities take interest. Furthermore, pseudonym use can increase intimacy amongst an elite, few entrusted with the real identity of the owner (Brennan & Pettit, 2008).

In online systems, anonymity and pseudonymity mechanisms are designed to enable autonomy as well as informational and relational privacy (Brey, 2000). From one point of view, shifting pseudonyms may support societal values such as freedom, justice, and democracy. From a practical perspective, Schechtman (1996) proposes that individuals are motivated by concerns such as self-interest (attaining goals),
moral responsibility (recognition for own actions), compensation (receiving benefit or loss from actions), and survival (ongoing existence). Tensions arise when the goals of society and those of the individual collide. Such tensions are apparent in many online systems, two of which are the subject of the following section.

**The iHelp and The Landing sites**

The identity management systems of the *iHelp* LMS and *The Landing* social software systems have been built in ways that impact how learners shape their identities and control their personal information. An examination of these systems through a constructionist lens can help us understand the philosophies underlying the system architecture and the implications with regards to trust, social capital, and learning.

**iHelp**

**Philosophical and architectural intent**

*iHelp* was developed by a group of researchers at the University of Saskatchewan (UofS). Learners at the UofS, may or may not physically meet each other as class sizes may be very large – especially for some junior classes. *iHelp* was designed to allow learners to interact in public forums, to access peer-support outside class time, and to maintain control over identity and personal information (Bull, Greer, McCalla, Kettel, & Bowes, 2001). The intent was to help first-year students adjust to post-secondary study. And, it has been found useful for graduate students to discuss sensitive issues: for example, playing the devil’s advocate role or communicating controversial viewpoints.

**Identity, anonymity, and pseudonymy**

The *iHelp* system allows learners to segregate their audiences with a high degree of granularity. The “role/relationship identity management (RRIM)” mechanism (Anwar & Greer, 2008b, p. 351) allows learners to shift in and out of roles and relationships. Initially, a learner is given a default role (such as “registrant”) and can assume roles relevant to particular role expectations (such as “English_student” or “English_2000_student_98”). If a learner wishes to enter into a relationship with another learner within a given context and/or for a specific project, she may choose a specific name (such as “Mary) and a particular kind of relationship (such as “project-partners”). When a learner leaves a relationship or completes a class, information exchanged within the specific context expires, and the partners cannot trace it to parent identities (Anwar & Greer, 2008b). If a learner wishes to ask a question or to seek help with a problem, but fears being perceived as naïve or “stupid” within her peer group, she can create a temporary pseudonym, use it for the purpose at-hand, discard or ignore the pseudonym, and continue using an identity peers recognize. This feature can be valuable to junior students, especially those who are taking a single course outside their major and minor disciplinary interests. If a learner feels exposed or threatened, she can discard the pseudonym, end a relationship, and assume an unaffiliated, non-linkable role. Only instructors or administrators with specific privileges can connect pseudonyms to their owners. Typically, a case where a participant has been abusive toward other participants
would merit an administrator or instructor making this identification and locking the learner into a stable identity while the complaint is investigated.

Privacy and control
To match learners with possible helpers, the iHelp system uses intelligent agents (mini-computer programs) to collect information about the learners through self evaluations (abilities, emotional states, problems, time constraints), peer-evaluations (reputation), browsing patterns, preference settings, voting behavior (judging usefulness of others’ messages), and a cognitive-style questionnaire (Bull et al., 2001; Bull, Greer, & McCalla, 2003). This data is aggregated, archived, and attributed to the parent identity. The data remains accessible for a period of time and purposes according to retention policies (Anwar & Greer, 2008a, 2008b). Both the participant and the administrators can view the archive and corresponding access logs.

Trust and social capital
Although a learner can switch pseudonyms and discard relationships, not all information can be hidden from everyone – especially administrators with high levels of access. The ability to review access to their reputation archives offers an opportunity for administrators to demonstrate respect and trustworthiness toward the learners by not accessing their records without reason. However, this trust opportunity is unavailable to other learners who cannot access each other’s archives nor retrieve their partner’s personal information when relationships are terminated at the end of classes or projects.

The constructionist view
The iHelp algorithms appear to do a good job of matching learners to available and willing helpers (Bull et al., 2001). However, from a constructionist viewpoint, limited knowledge of each other’s identities limits relational dialogue and the extent to which learners can shape each others’ sense of self and understanding of the world. In theory, lack of interdependence may reduce the sincerity and accuracy of reflexive dialogue. In this case, a learner’s need only fulfills her own interests at a given moment. For learners who only study within a cohort for a short period of time (e.g. one term or semester), the consequences of maintaining weak links to community may be minimal. However, for learners who wish to build and maintain strong and productive longer term networks, they need mechanisms for the development of interpersonal trust and social capital.

With “real” identities potentially obfuscated by consecutive use of short-lived pseudonyms, learners might feel less inhibited in sharing extremely private information. Such context-specific, short-term sharing may serve many personal motivations. For example, if a learner discloses that she has personal problems, she might be released from some of the workload in a collaborative assignment. She can complete her class (self-interest), achieve a passing grade (compensation), and continue toward her degree (survival). In a group-work situation, she may also be recognized for the performance of others though she did little to contribute (moral responsibility). In this example, one might question to what extent higher societal values such as justice, benevolence, and equality are balanced.
Although identities are protected, non-voluntary cues can still betray the parent identity. The system does not neutralize the effects of linguistic style, cognitive capacity, nor dispositional traits. It is possible, therefore, for observant affiliates or peers to triangulate identity based on an individual’s quirks, diction, or use of idioms. Open, voluntary disclosure of “real-world” roles may also allow identification. Furthermore, the system itself collects a tremendous amount of information about the participants. Learners interact in the faith that their information is secure and will not be used for nefarious purposes by either the software agents or unauthorized users. Learners must approach interaction with a sense of trust or suspend their fears as per the paradox of trust.

**The Landing**

**Philosophical and architectural intent**

Learners at Athabasca University (AU) study at a distance and most never meet each other face-to-face. Interactions, then, are mediated through technology. *The Landing* site is based on an open-source system called Elgg and offers features similar to other social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Ning. The site is intended to be an AU-specific community, hosted on firewall-protected servers. Both the *iHelp* and *The Landing* systems offer privacy mechanisms. But, the most recent work on *The Landing* site is focused on functional segmentation of audience and provision of relevant toolsets.

**Identity, anonymity, and pseudonymy**

When participants edit their profiles, list their interests, post status messages, upload and tag objects, and write blogs, they become cross-linked with others in the systems. This allows them to locate and select “followers.” “Following” other users need not be reciprocal. Although the architecture of *The Landing* does not support multiple pseudonyms, it is possible to change one’s publicly viewable name which effectively modifies the identity across the activity record. In this way, the participant’s entire history of actions, disclosed information, and non-voluntary cues remain aggregated under the new name.

**Privacy and control**

Numerous modules permit information sharing such as shared-bookmarking and private messaging. Elgg provides a rough access-control mechanism so that a participant can allow or disallow friends, logged-in users, group/community members, and the general public to view specific parts of their personal information. Dron, Anderson, and Siemens (2011) argue that these access restrictions still over-generalize the context and cannot respond to the constantly changing needs, roles, and networks of the participants. In other words, it does not allow enough audience segmentation. Since *The Landing* does not offer multiple pseudonyms, additional mechanisms are required. Two of the solutions they propose include: (1) relationship differentiation, and (2) context switching. Greater specificity in tagging relationships, hypothetically, should allow greater specificity in access control. Context switching will allow increased control over the sharing of specific toolsets depending on the needs of the project or
situation. To these ends, Dron et al. (2011) have been developing a suite of plug-ins called a “context-switcher” wherein each tab (entry to a page) can be made available to select groups or individuals. In addition, these tabs can be configured in terms of visual design and toolset layout (wikis, shared bookmarks, and other common tools). Affiliates still only see those aspects to which they are given access.

**Trust and social capital**

In the spirit of the paradox of trust, participants must offer some information in order to become aware of each other and subsequently identify how they wish to be affiliated. This is especially true for relationship differentiation and context switching; otherwise, there is no basis upon which to determine what kind of relationship and tools are needed for interaction.

Access to the tabs is user-controlled rather than automatically deleted when classes or relationships end. In this way, *The Landing* provides histories of user interactions upon which present and future relationships may be based. Social capital can thus accumulate overtime and potentially across relationship types.

**The constructionist view**

*The Landing* assumes that sharing information, under the assumption of trust, will result in relational dialogue and the accumulation of social capital. Once interaction initiates, values, opinions, and social norms can evolve. In theory, ongoing dialogue allows identities to emerge, reinforcing personal investment, and possibly, mutual accountability. When this happens, learners can co-author each others’ narratives through mutual exchange. But, without some users taking the first step, other factors are necessary to motivate interaction. In other words, the system must offer some intrinsic benefit to the learner and the learning community. In addition, as identifiably increases so does personal accountability and risk. The context-switcher module, allowing greater granularity of access control, allows learners to mitigate this risk, but at the cost of reduced sharing of personal information – in effect, restricting intimacy and possibly exchange of knowledge.

**Conclusion**

At first glance, control over interaction and personal information might seem to enhance authenticity and trust. Identity management tools, however, can change the very nature of discourse and relationship-building as practices that support the development of trust and social capital shift levels of intimacy. Extreme levels of privacy may limit exchange of information whilst anonymity and pseudonymity may affect the degree and type of information exchanged.

Although freedom from social influence may encourage more spontaneity, it may also cause imbalances between the needs of the individual and the needs of the community. The tension inherent in disharmony is not necessarily bad as it can act as a catalyst in which tools or practices are created or modified in order to regain balance and sense of self: “Remaining on a learning edge takes a delicate balancing act between honouring the history of the practice and shaking free from it. This is only possible when communities interact with and explore other perspectives beyond their boundaries” (Wenger, 2009, p. 3).
Individual self-fulfillment is a strong current in modern society (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). But, one might ask what it means for an individual to truly flourish in online environments. In a constructionist sense, it is through the active exchange of information that the norms, values, and socially accepted knowledge of the world are formed (Ferreday et al., 2006; Hodgson & Watland, 2004). Therefore, to focus solely on privacy and information control, without at least an acknowledgement of the relational nature of the overall social ecology of networked learning communities, is to undermine the very target of ethical work – the betterment of both the individual and the community. So, we must ask what kinds of environments, what degrees of privacy, and what identity management tools can benefit both learners and learning communities or networks? Future research directions include investigations into whether identity management affordances in social networking systems are better standardized to ensure learners can easily move across systems without undue concern about how their aggregated identities can be managed or if customized systems can better support the needs of diverse learners over time and across contexts.

Notes on contributors
Marguerite Koole is a PhD student in the e-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning doctoral program in the Educational Research Department at the Lancaster University, UK. Marguerite is also an instructional media analyst and program administrator (EdD program) for the Centre for Distance Education at the Athabasca University in Canada. Her current research is focused on “identity positioning thresholds” for doctoral students on networked learning courses. Her other interests include mobile learning and educational technology.

Gale Parchoma is a lecturer in the e-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning doctoral program in the Educational Research Department at the Lancaster University, UK. Her research interests include teaching, learning and technology perspectives-in-practice, online identity, threshold crossings in doctoral study, simulation-based education, and higher education policy. Gale has a BEd in Secondary Education and a BA (Hons) in North American Literature from the University of Saskatchewan, an MA in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Victoria, and a PhD in Educational Administration from the University of Saskatchewan. Contact her at galeparchoma@gmail.com.

References


