

Affinity spaces:

How young people live and learn online and out of school

The online world has given new life to older traditions of interest-driven, out-of-school learning.

By James Paul Gee

The internet can be a minefield of misinformation, misbehavior, divisiveness, and risk, but it is also the scene of an extraordinary revolution in out-of-school teaching and learning. Increasingly, young people's most powerful learning opportunities can be found online, in experiences and environments created by people working outside the K-12 school system and featuring educational practices rarely seen in traditional schools.

Powerful teaching and learning occur in any number of settings beyond the school, from social networks to informal clubs, political advocacy groups, neighborhood centers, and on and on. Indeed, throughout the course of human evolution and history, most teaching and learning has happened not within formal institutions but inside what I like to call "affinity spaces," loosely organized social and cultural settings in which the work of teaching tends to be shared by many people, in many locations, who are connected by a shared interest or passion (Gee, 2007).

If you want to understand how today's young people are living and learning online, you need to understand how such affinity spaces function. To illustrate, let me give you an example from my own experience, far away and long ago.

When I was young (in the late 1940s and the 1950s), I was part of a very devout Catholic family that interacted almost exclusively with fellow Catholics. Much of our lives occurred within a large Catholic affinity space, which was made up of a network of smaller, linked places. They included our home (with its religious statues and images, places for devotional activities, and a room filled with religious books), other people's Catholic homes, our elementary school, our parish church, the local Catholic high school and college (where we were all expected to go after elementary school), and other Catholic churches in the area (where we attended baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals of Catholic friends in other parishes). Further, they included the Catholic churches we attended when on vacations, other places where we attended reli-

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gious events (such as retreats or gatherings to hear speakers), sites where the school or church sponsored social events, and the cathedral for the diocese (a place we rarely visited but that was, nonetheless, a looming presence in our lives). As people moved among these various sites (see Figure 1), they remained connected to one another by their shared affinity for Catholicism and the ideas, values, and activities associated with it.

Within any given affinity space, some places tend to play a special role, serving as home bases, where one often finds the most passionate members of the group — the key organizers, motivators, teachers, and standard bearers — and where people often come together to engage in the activities that keep them linked to each other. For us, there were three home bases: one’s own home, one’s school, and the parish church.

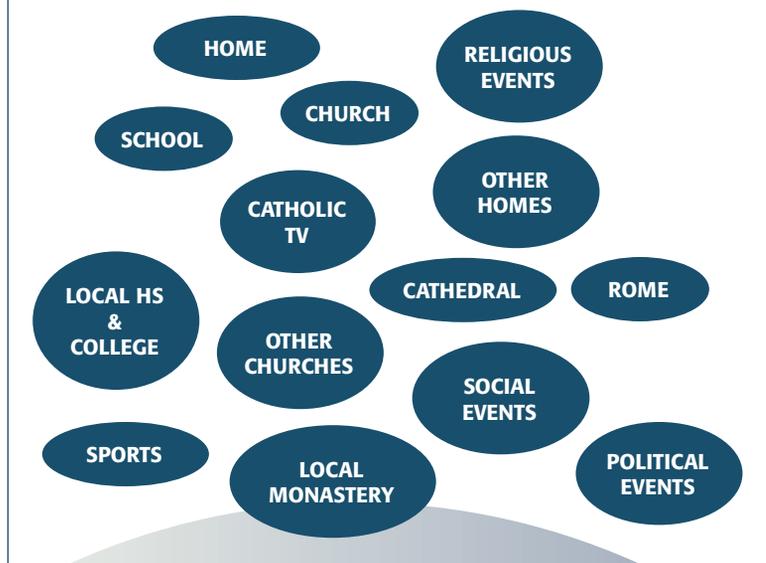
These three home bases were closely connected. Priests, nuns, and other families regularly visited our home; we regularly visited other homes, our church, and our school. Priests from the church visited the school for religious instruction, and the nuns from the school regularly ran events at the church for their students and their families.

Note that the nuns were by no means our only teachers, and school wasn’t the only place where they engaged in teaching. Rather, education went on in multiple places, taking different forms for different sorts of people (e.g., young people, converts, returning Catholics, or devout Catholics seeking to deepen their faith). This tends to be norm in every large affinity space: Teaching and learning are not confined to one site or one kind of person; they are distributed across many locations, people, and practices.

Further, for the people who belong to an affinity space, the goal of teaching and learning is to develop skills that allow them to solve the particular sorts of problems that matter to the group. In my Catholic affinity space, that meant learning to deal with dilemmas such as how to act morally or how to explain why bad things happen to good people. Thus, I studied Catholic theology and developed a range of historical, philosophical, and linguistic (e.g., Latin) ideas and skills. (Later on, those skills transferred nicely to academic work.)

I would argue that this sort of distributed teaching and learning — in which many people, moving back and forth among a number of related locations, try to help each other confront the problems that matter within their affinity space — has been the norm throughout human history. Thanks to digital media, this sort of education is becoming the norm again today. But at the same time, digital media are radically transforming the ways such affinity spaces function (Jenkins, 2006).

FIGURE 1.
Some of the spaces in the Catholic affinity space.



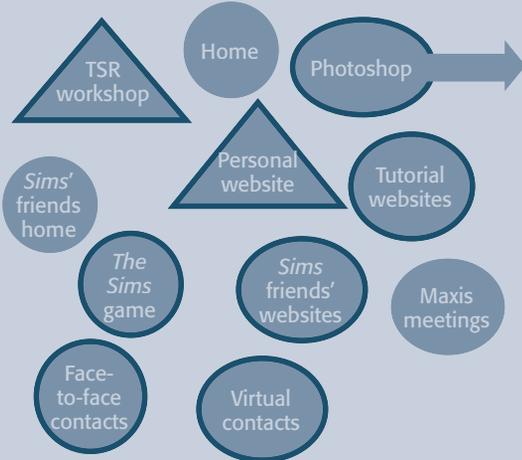
New affinity spaces

It is hard to think of a significant matter of human concern that hasn’t attracted a thriving online community of problem solvers. Today, one can find affinity groups devoted to everything from citizen science to improving women’s health, passing legislation, curing rare diseases, writing fan fiction, and countless other topics, including many interests that are school-like (such as affinity spaces focused on tech skills, history, and mythology). And within these affinity spaces, people are fully engaged in helping each other to learn, act, and produce, regardless of their age, place of origin, formal credentials, or level of expertise.

In my research, I’ve found that one kind of affinity group — inhabited by video gamers — offers particularly important lessons for K-12 education, suggesting how we might better organize our work around students’ interests and passions (Gee, 2011). Let me be clear, though: This is not a plea for educators to use video games in school. Rather, it is a plea for educators to consider what the world of video games gets right and to recognize just how much high-quality teaching and learning is going on outside school.

The first thing to understand is that a good video game is a well-designed educational environment. Entirely consistent with recent research in the learning sciences, a good game gives players interesting and challenging problems to solve, varied opportunities to learn, and instruction and mentoring as needed. These features can be found in every success-

FIGURE 2.
Some of the spaces in *The Sims* affinity space.



Note: Shapes with dark borders are virtual, those without are physical. Triangles are home bases. The arrow means that Photoshop is part of a bigger Photoshop affinity space as well.

ful game, whether it has to do with nation-building (e.g., *Civilization*), fighting wars (*Call of Duty*), solving algebraic equations (*Dragon Box*), building a family and community (*The Sims*), or succeeding in one’s role as a four-inch-tall house-cleaning robot (*Chibi-Robo*).

Second, it’s important to know that gamers often do much more than play games. When they have a real interest in or passion for a game or a type of game, they often take their game-based learning into many other locations, such that it becomes a truly socio-cultural experience. For example, their gaming room at home is connected not only to the virtual spaces of the games themselves but to other interest-driven internet sites where they discuss, learn, and teach about the games they play. Further, their gaming rooms are also connected to other physical spaces, such as gaming rooms in friends’ homes, stores where gamers gather, gamer conventions, gamer clubs, and, perhaps, places where they play nondigital tabletop games.

In short, gamers often come and go among a whole range of physical and virtual places that are part of a larger affinity space, in something like the way that I moved among the Catholic schools, churches, and homes of my youth. At the same time, though, such gaming spaces tend to be more fluid than was my Catholic community. Their boundaries are somewhat harder to demarcate, and they change more rapidly, as gamers’ interests and passions evolve and new technologies are introduced.

The *Sims* affinity space

For example, imagine that a gamer named Mary is devoted to playing and designing for *The Sims* (a popular series of games, launched nearly two decades ago, in which players inhabit the lives of virtual characters). If we observed Mary over a certain period of time — a day, a week, a month, or many months — we could map out all the places that she visits, both physical and virtual, and all the routes that she chooses to take in pursuit of her interest in or passion for *The Sims*. Mary’s itinerary (the places she visits and for how long) might change from day to day or week to week, or it might remain fairly stable over many months, but the map would be specific to her, showing which parts of the affinity space she inhabited and how.

For example, our map may show Mary spending a lot of time playing *The Sims* in her game room at home, or perhaps traveling to a gaming convention (and going to many rooms within it), or going online to visit a fan-based website (and its various virtual rooms). Each of these is its own small affinity space within the larger one. And of course, the *Sims* affinity space itself is just one part of the overall gamer affinity space — if Mary plays other games as well, we could draw a “Mary map” that includes them, too. (See Figure 2, which sketches out some of the spaces a person might go within the *Sims* affinity space.)

We may also find that Mary has a specific home base for her activities, a place that she frequents so often that it has become the heart and soul of her *Sims* endeavors, and to which she tends to return after visiting other places of interest. Perhaps she has several home bases, or none. Some might be physical spaces (e.g., the apartment of a friend who shares her passion for *The Sims*), and others might be virtual (such as the interest-driven website TSR Workshop: www.thesimsresource.com/workshop).

Further, Mary might participate in more than one affinity space at a time — the *Sims* affinity space and, say, one devoted to the image-editing software Photoshop — and she might even bring those spaces together. For example, in addition to playing *The Sims*, she might take images from the game, alter them using Photoshop, and use them in her own graphic fan fiction. For that matter, as she moves back and forth between these two affinity spaces, she may discover fellow travelers, people who, like her, are passionate about both *The Sims* and using Photoshop to make art based on video game characters.

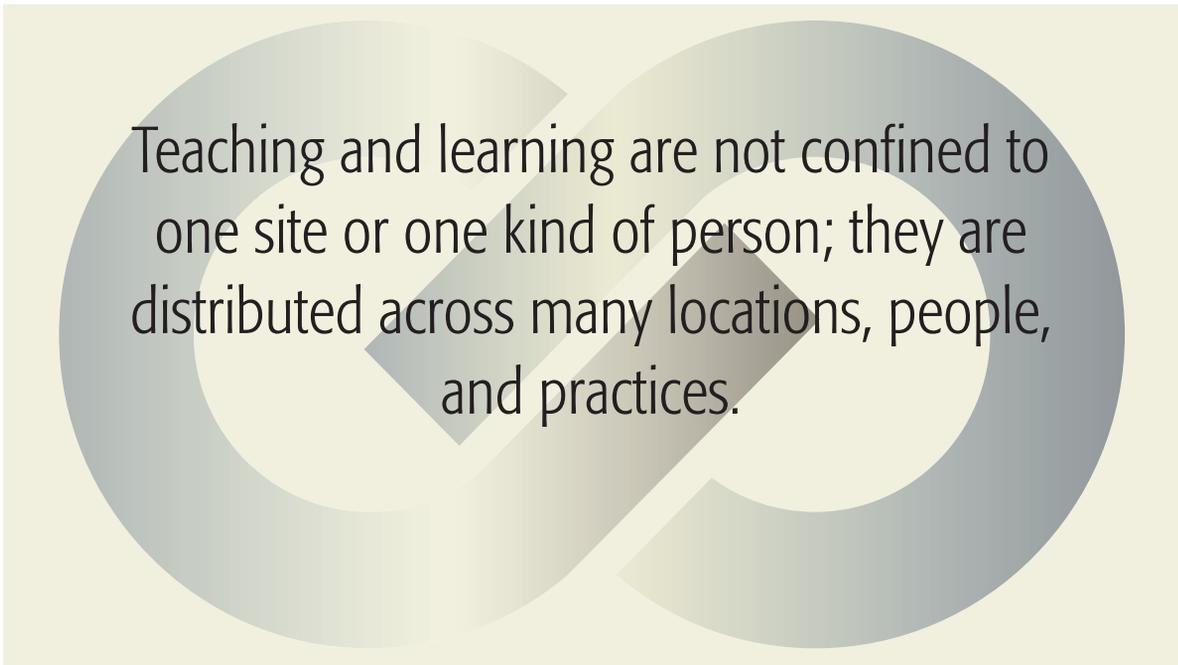
In the process, Mary and other members of the affinity group will learn — and teach each other — a wide range of skills. For example, consider a

15-year-old girl named Alex (Gee & Hayes, 2010), who has a large following as a writer of fan fiction. Specifically, she uses *The Sims* to create graphic vampire romance stories (with images and text). Alex makes her own images (using tools that can modify images from the game and other tools from outside the game), writes and edits her own texts (with help from fans), and maintains a web presence to keep in contact with her thousands of readers. TSR is one of her home bases, and her own website is a home base for an affinity space organized around her by her devoted fans.

In her work across the many spaces in which she carries out her passion, Alex has mastered many things:

- She knows *The Sims* as a piece of software inside and out;
- She knows in-game design tools and is proficient in using Adobe Photoshop;
- She created and maintains a polished and highly trafficked personal website;
- She knows how to link her website and stories to other *Sims* fan sites to create a network;
- She knows how to make custom characters, events, and environments (which requires knowing how to import material into Photoshop, use Photoshop tools, and export material back to the game);
- She knows how to use several kinds of custom software designed by other players;
- She knows how to use “cheats” to change or remove unwanted in-game features;
- She knows how to access tutorials for various skills as needed and how to build a tutorial for others;
- She knows how to write a compelling narrative;
- She knows how to match compelling images with text;
- She knows how to recruit readers (where to advertise her stories, how to create banners as advertisements, teasers, etc.);
- She knows how to edit and stage her story images (shading images, cropping them, etc.);
- She knows how to post text and images on her website to recruit new readers and motivate old ones;
- She knows how to respond to fans (emotionally, in particular) and connect them with a community (which requires that she write in a very different style from the one she uses in her stories); and
- She knows how to work effectively with volunteer editors from her fan base.

Based on the emails Alex receives from her readers, it is clear that many of them adore her and value the ways she helps them deal with the problems teen girls face. Moreover, she is gaining the sorts of 21st-century skills that any good school would aspire to teach.



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Dilemmas for teachers and parents

It goes without saying that if children have no access to school, they will be shut out of critical opportunities to learn, interact with peers, and develop their own identity. Today, one might say the same about children who have no access to web-based affinity spaces. Increasingly, it is by joining and exploring such spaces that young people pursue their interests and passions, define who they want to be, and develop important knowledge and skills. Those who spend all of their learning time in the classroom, without also having chances to roam among a myriad of virtual sites and their related locales, will be massively disadvantaged.

Historically, the nation's public schools have tended to isolate themselves from the outside world. Rather than seeking to become part of a larger network of affinity groups, schools have held themselves out to be the main and only site for teaching and learning academic skills. What, then, are today's schools to do? How can they compete with the sort of passion that animates the myriad online affinity groups that young people are now involved in on their own time? For that matter, what can schools do to ensure that all children (and not just those whose families are able to provide active mentoring) have opportunities to explore interests and develop the sorts of passions that fuel deep learning and identity formation?

Of course, not all affinity spaces are good learn-

ing environments. Not all of them include members who are devoted to teaching, serving as mentors, or engaging in healthy forms of socialization. That is precisely why it is so important for parents and guardians to steer children toward the best available affinity spaces, ones that help them develop their interests, find passions, and build mastery. And, I would argue, that's also why public school educators must begin to see it as their job not just to provide classroom instruction but also to help their students find, create, and join their own affinity spaces. Today, teachers must learn to curate the spaces available on the internet and help students find ones that will serve their needs. **K**

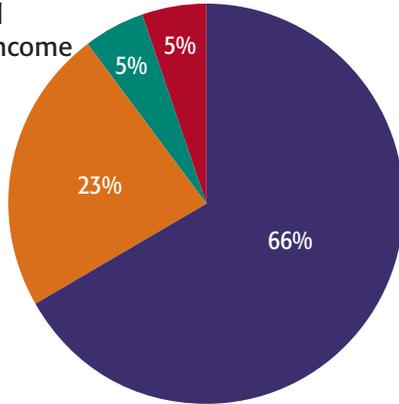
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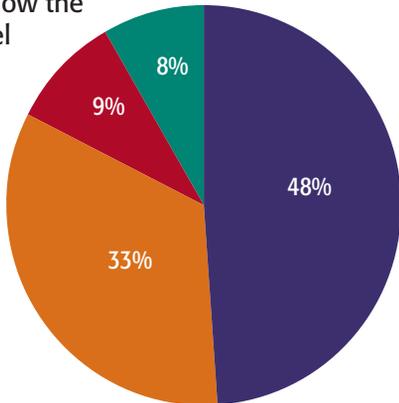
Rates of digital ownership and connectivity among families below the median income

■ High-speed home access ■ Mobile-only access
■ Dial-up home access ■ No personal access

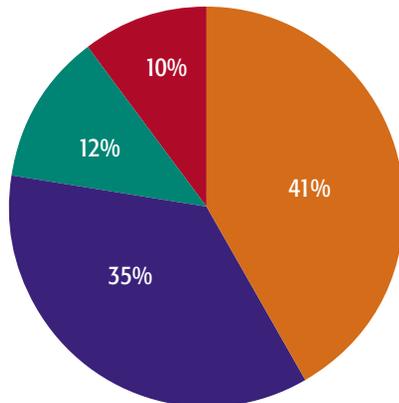
All low- and moderate-income families



Families below the poverty level



Immigrant Hispanic families



Source: Levine, M., Rideout, V., & Katz, V. (2016). *Opportunity for all? Technology and learning in lower-income families*. New York: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop.

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