

Living and Learning in Chatrooms (or does informal learning have anything to teach us ?)¹

by

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At this moment in time, chatrooms are, allegedly, some of the most dangerous landscapes facing children in the modern world. In the UK over the summer of 2002, the abductions and murders of several children were initially attributed to contacts made in chatrooms (allegations later proved completely untrue), and a recent study by the British broadcasting regulator suggests that parents are most troubled by their inability to control children's online experiences – specially in chatrooms - fearing for their health and safety (Hanley 2002). Some of these concerns are recognisable as familiar steps in the regulation dance, ritualistically performed over the emergence of new media over the past hundred years. There are a number of well known tropes in the anxiety raised around chatrooms which re-play older concerns around TV, Film and even print – namely how the world of adult experiences may be open to the child beyond the gaze of the watchful parent. At the same time, chatrooms and other virtual communities have been offered as models for developing new forms of learning, and as opportunities to play with and experience new forms of being. Furthermore, chatrooms seem to bewilder a number of adult commentators, as they appear to offer pleasures impenetrable to the outside world

For these reasons chatrooms have seemed an intriguing kind of 'lost –world', needing new kinds of social anthropology or ethnography to infiltrate the curious codes and conventions of this developing medium. From the early speculation of Sherry Turkle (1995), to the more nuanced studies of online communities (Jones 1999), commentators have attempted to show how the quality of the virtual experience, the kind of interactivity and development of community all complement and extend forms of social interaction. From the perspective of educational research, chatrooms sit alongside other kind of media like TV or Film which offer the apparent paradox of requiring a 'literacy to 'read', or consume the media experience. However, as in the case of TV or Film young people learn how to make sense of the medium informally either through the peer culture or auto-didacticism. However this kind of learning - or literacy, as it has been conceptualised (Buckingham 1989) - is rarely acknowledged as such. Indeed the formal education system usually gives low status or completely ignores this whole level of learning (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1993).

This seemingly contradictory relationship between informally learnt literacies and formal education is being brought into sharp tension in the current era as the 'educational' claims made for the use of ICT and the internet appear to challenge

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the dominance and security of both the knowledge taught in the academy and the ways of teaching and learning traditionally found within those same academic institutions (Papert 1993). Indeed, it is not too much to claim that developments in media technologies have inspired and helped re-conceptualise a host of arguments relating to the nature of teaching and learning (Lankshear *et al* 2000). There has been considerable attention paid to the role of informal and out-of-school learning with a particular interest in the question of leaning styles (Coffield 2000). How do these informal modes of learning work and in what ways do they question, supplement or complement traditional models of pedagogy? This is not disinterested scholarship because both the commercial motors behind new technology and new media developments as well as the formal State education systems have a concern with increasing performance and appeal (Kenway & Bullen 2001). As other writers have noted, this interest in informal learning is riddled with contradictions in that some approaches seem to imply that informal learning may be a decontextualised technique which could be synthesised for other contexts (Coffield 2000a). Others infer that the structural relationships normally found in classrooms between teacher and taught may need to be re-configured (Katz 2000).

This paper will offer empirical data to elaborate these questions further. Partly because of the paradoxes surrounding notions of informal learning in general, and partly to see how the demonised domain of the chatroom might be made explicable in terms of an analysis of pedagogy, we will be offering an account of children's 'learning' in chatrooms. This forms part of our ongoing investigation through a project called 'Shared Spaces: Informal learning of digital cultures' (www.wac.co.uk/sharedspaces). We will begin by describing the context for the study and then explore how children learn how to operate, (or be initiated into), chatrooms. This entails focusing on how the children support and 'teach' each other; how the textual structures of the chatroom itself (in comparable ways to some computer games and even computer programmes) 'scaffold' new and continuing learners; and how children use their participation as means of exploring their place within a peer culture especially in relation to gender.

The study

Our data was collected at an informal education and arts centre, WAC, in north London which runs various arts activities on weekends for the young people from low income families (www.wac.co.uk). The girls in this study (aged 10 – 13) were participating in chatrooms in the 'cybercafe', a loosely supervised suite of computers which gave children free time on the machines over the course of the academic year from September 2001 to June 2002. We also ran a 2-day course on chatrooms which attempted to engage girls in thinking critically about their engagement in chatrooms. Rebekah Willett worked in the cybercafe and engaged with the children relatively informally - she was probably perceived as adult helper or at times an elder sister. In addition, we have taped discussions between pairs of children as well as direct interviews. The 2-day course has recordings of the teaching sessions, the children's work and more formal class presentations. Synchronous chat was recorded on screen or annotated live *in situ*.

The chat room – Habbohotel

We focus on one chatroom site called 'Habbohotel' (Habbohotel.com). This is an avatar-based chatroom (in contrast to text-based chatrooms) used by the children in our study and seemingly marketed towards this age grouping. The home page of Habbohotel proclaims: 'This hotel is primarily for teens in the UK, but everyone is welcome'. It is obviously difficult to know exactly who is participating in Habbohotel, although the cartoon-like environment makes the site feel 'child-friendly'. The site is advertised on after-school television, and during observation there were 2000 – 4000 participants on the site at any given time.

As in text-based chatrooms, Habbohotel offers on-line conversations in the form of real-time written communication. In addition to chatting, a participant 'designs' a cartoon character (called a Habbo) and then moves the Habbo around various visual representations of rooms in the cyberhotel (see figure 1). There is a wide range of 'rooms' include including bars (where you can request soft drinks), swimming pools, dance floors, chapels and private bedrooms. They contain furniture, drinks, fireplaces, and even 'spin the bottle' games. Conversations appear as speech bubbles, as in a comic strip, and a Habbo can walk around a room, dance, swim, sit, lie in bed, take a bath and of course talk. Words can be whispered, shouted or just spoken through a series of graphic conventions- and if a Habbo is on the other side of the room, only snippets of conversation will appear to be 'heard'.



Fig 1: The Chatroom: Habbohotel (18 July 2002)

Participants 'in' Habbohotel also have the option of designing their own room, but furnishing the room requires Habbo credits which can be obtained through (real) credit card payment or through much sought after jobs in the hotel. When using Habbohotel, the screen has various icons which allow the user to use different functions in the hotel. Looking at Figure one, the icons in the lower right corner show the participants' Habbobank account (the bag with coins), the hotel navigator (used to switch rooms), and the Habboconsole. With the console one can search for other Habbos (to find out which room they are in), send messages and develop a list of friends who use the site. Participants can enter information on their Habboaccount such as a goal and a personal greeting, and this information is accessible to other participants by using the Habboconsole or just by clicking on a Habbo in a room. In Figure 1 above, we have clicked on a Habbo (resulting in a yellow arrow appearing on the screen over the Habbo) so that information on that Habbo appears in the lower right corner of the screen (the Habbo's name and goal).

Although we observed boys using the site, and certainly there are many male Habbos, we have only collected data on girls' use of the site. In the cybercafe, there were not as many boys in the 10 – 13 year-old age range, and the boys in this environment preferred to play games rather than chat. We will be focusing on the experiences of four girls, two Afro-Caribbean and two white, all who went

to different schools and only knew each other from WAC. Although all the girls had computers in their homes, three said their computers were too old and slow to use Habbohotel. Only one girl, Helena, had experience with the site outside of WAC.

Teaching – who or what is doing the teaching in chatrooms?

Our analysis will focus on the pedagogical relations between Helena and the other girls. We will argue that in effect, she acted a 'teacher' and that how she fulfilled this role and indeed what she taught, constitute the essence of the 'informal learning' contained within children's chatroom culture. However, we also suggest that the 'teaching' of the rules and conventions in Habbohotel, is inseparable from a normative regulatory discourse around gender (Walkerdine & Lucey 1989). Learning how to operate in this instance is indistinguishable from its specific social context. However, Helena was only one resource for the girls' learning. Children do not sit down and read instruction booklets on how to interact in chatrooms. Yet many rules, procedures and ways of communicating have to be learned to facilitate participation, so the first learning tool we suggest is the website interface itself. The particular structures of Habbohotel website work by 'scaffolding' the learning so that children can immediately engage in chat and yet quickly progress to learn more complicated ways of interacting where the informal talk amongst children in real world situations such as classrooms or cybercafes is key to further kinds of learning.

Scaffolded learning within Habbohotel

Our first example concerns Natalie (age 10). She had limited experience of chatrooms (she had no access to chatrooms at home), although she had used a simple text-based chatroom which is located on a black music site run by her friend's father. She decided to try Habbohotel after seeing, Helena, using the site in the cybercafe. At first Natalie explored the site on her own, and after one session (approximately 45 minutes) she 'worked' along side Helena who seemed to us to act as a 'peer-tutor' (Tobin 1998).

The more Natalie interacted with the site, the more she learned. Similar to playing many computer games, one can enter and gain a satisfying degree of success in Habbohotel with very little experience. This construction not only facilitates learning, but also has the economic advantage of motivating the user to continue playing. The site is particularly easy to experiment with. For example, instead of having a separate place for kids to go to find information, just clicking the mouse around any given room gives the participant information such as the name and goal of another Habbo (as shown in Figure 1). Learning to move around the room, sit down, lie down in bed, get a drink from a refrigerator can be done by clicking around a room. The Habbo console (see figure 2) is also constructed to make interaction and learning easy. As educationalists we suggest that the site supports what the user already knows by providing simple, consistent and accessible answers or solutions to further queries, reminding us of the principle of scaffolding. The concept here is adapted from Vygotsky's theories of the zone of proximal development, where he suggests that effective

instruction occurs through a process of support and adventure (1962). Texts perform some of this scaffolding; and an interactive activity like a chatroom need to induct participants as well as stretch experienced users.

Figure 2 Habbo console (17 August 2002)



For example, when a participant logs on to the site, the console appears as an icon with a note of how many messages or 'friend requests' the person has received. By appearing in this format, the icon lets new Habbo participants know that they can send messages and request friends. Natalie quickly learned how to use the console when she read that she had a 'friend request' (she clicked on the console and the request appeared with a button offering the option of 'accept' 'deny'). Clicking on the console leads to yet more options which can be explored by trial and error (for example, clicking on 'find' takes you to a screen which asks you which Habbo you would like to search for and a button which says 'Ask to become a Friend'). So the more one experiments, the more information one will get about another Habbo. Most importantly, the site is carefully constructed so that both novices and experts can find appropriate reward.

Natalie's interactions with other Habbos also led her to 'discover' the functions of the website. For example, Habbos told her to do things such as 'send friend requests' or 'go to a private room'. When this happened she was anxious to do as asked and would respond through three techniques: trial and error; using the Habbohelp desk; or by asking Helena. Natalie also asked other Habbos for information, such as how to get a job, and in many cases we observed Natalie watch another Habbo do something (such as holding up a sign), and then figure out how to do it herself.

The site also makes an attempt to inform participants about safety and possible financial risks in chatrooms. The home page contains links to 'safety tips', a 'scambuster' report and a newsletter - 'HabboHood watch'. Not surprisingly, because these are links to other pages (so the safety messages do not appear unless a user chooses to click on them), we rarely saw young people reading these reports. However, Habbohotel has designed a more effective way to get messages to participants - through short messages which appear when one is moving to a different room (see figure 3). Although we were sceptical that this system had any effect, the girls not only said that they read those messages (because the messages were short and the girls thought they might be about something else), but were able to recount some of them.

Figure 3 'Impostor Alert' (18 July 2002)



Peer tutoring

The following interaction occurred as Helena tried to help Natalie get a job in Habbohotel. They are sharing a computer and are in Natalie's Habboaccount, but Helena is doing the typing and controlling the mouse:

- 1 HELENA: first you ask nicely then you ask horribly (*types 'does anybody have any jobs' and changes 'say' to 'shout'*)
- 2 NATALIE: is there any jobs on offer? Trading isn't it?
- 3 HELENA: no they are actually giving out jobs as well
- 4 NATALIE: (*reads speech bubble*) go to chill out room
- 5 HELENA: no that's not really good
- 6 NATALIE: isn't it?
- 7 HELENA: no, he's getting paid to say that
- 8 NATALIE: is he? NOOOO
- 9 HELENA: I know it's unfair

In this interaction, Helena is explicitly teaching Natalie about conventions and rules in Habbohotel. Before this excerpt, Helena was typing the question 'does anybody have any jobs', but the girls have been trying to ask Habbos for jobs for a few minutes without success. In line 1 above, Helena introduces the idea of shouting, and explains when shouting is acceptable. In line 2, Natalie refers to a remark made earlier by Helena about trading. (Helena informed Natalie that Habbos could offer to trade items, such as furniture.) Helena tells Natalie that the other habbos are not trading, and that there are jobs being offered. In line 4 Natalie is reading what another Habbo is saying, telling people to go to a

particular room. Helena informs Natalie that the room isn't 'very good' and that the other Habbo might be being paid to advertise the room under discussion. This tells Natalie that Habbohotel is full of people who might have ulterior motives, and (more important to Natalie at this time), that there are jobs to be had which involve promoting rooms. In line 8, Natalie expresses frustration that she doesn't have the job of 'chill out room promoter', and Helena agrees in line 9 that it is unfair that someone else has such an easy job. What is striking (and typical) about this exchange, is that Helena does not make explicit or explain how to get a job or indeed, how she knows that the other Habbo is not just wanting to trade items. Unlike traditional educational discourse where the more knowledgeable person imparts information and explains the thought processes behind the decisions they have taken (see Edwards & Mercer 1987), Helena expresses opinions (lines 5 and 9), and imparts information. Rather than explain the economic motivation behind the chill out room, Helena first expresses an opinion (line 5 'that's not really good'): then, after Natalie's response, she follows up with information about the economy of Habbohotel. The quality of the discourse here values opinion and fact rather than theorisation and explanation.

Playing – Informal learning of chatroom culture

In contrast to the direct, almost overt teaching described above, the focus of this section will be on informal ways of learning in which it is not clear who has the knowledge, who is doing the learning or even what the knowledge is. We will be describing the activities of the girls as a type of play. The learning here is more a process of meaning negotiation than learning operational skills, like applying a specific set of rules or conventions. However, the concept of play here is quite specific in that the girls' conversations suggest that the chatroom interactions offer the opportunity to play-act or experiment both with new forms of language as well gender and sexuality. In particular we can see the girls taking risks and experimenting with taboo topics. In our conclusion we will try to conceptualise how this notion of play relates theoretically to the notion of informal learning.

New language

There is a growing body of research on electronic text language including text messaging, emails as well as chatrooms (see Green and Adam, 2001; Herring, 1996; Snyder, 1998). Guy Merchant (2002) suggests that some critiques adopt a panic stance, claiming that electronic texts are corrupting language because users do not follow the 'proper' conventions of language use. On the other hand, research describes young people using electronic texts as part of a creative process of meeting their communicational needs. Aligning his work with the latter area of research, Merchant writes:

[Internet Relay Chats] blur the distinction between speech and writing and as such constitute a new linguistic genre best described as a rapid written conversation' (2002:2).

As Merchant describes, chatroom conversations (which are written texts) are conversational and reflect spoken language. Participants create various text-images such as emoticons or ways of writing to reflect speaking (using capital letters to denote shouting, for example). Furthermore, because chatroom conversations happen in real time, the writing has to be produced very quickly.

Various new language forms have developed, such as acronyms (btw = by the way); the use of numbers as words or parts of words (gr8 = great); and phonetic spelling (e.g. wots up = what's up). Another form of language, particularly used in those chatrooms which filter out swear words or sexually explicit language, is the use of intentional mis-spellings, or the use of symbols to represent letters (a33 = ass, fcukin sl@g = fucking slag). These examples were taken from Habbohotel whose filtering system is apparently updated on a daily basis.

This new language creation has been noted by a range of scholars but not usually as a particular kind of play. Yet it is a play with words, in the tradition of playground language studies (Opie & Opie 1959), or more specifically, playing with the representation of words. In our conclusion we suggest how this type of play relates both to other kinds of play observed in this study and to informal learning more generally. Several of the girls were very slow at typing, and therefore loved discovering new ways to abbreviate their chat. We noted one girl in the cybercafe who made one attempt at using chatrooms, but because she was very literal in replying to questions (writing whole sentences to answer 'wots up') and had not developed a way of abbreviating her written texts (or her thoughts), she was not able to participate in the subsequent fast moving conversations. The girls would speak the words aloud as they typed them, imitating the sounds of their speech in their written texts. They would lengthen their vowels (e.g. sooooo), write phonetic representations of words ('tik' for thick) and communicate in a kind of teenage dialect ('luvchick is in de house') which in itself can be seen as an evolution of Black London dialects (Back 1996). The girls are playing with these bits of language and using them for their own purposes. The abbreviations and other means to fast communication were quickly adopted by the girls, particularly relatively simple ones like 'u' for 'you', a/s/l (asking for age, sex and location) and eliminating capital letters and punctuation, and show how motivated this pre-teen readership is to participate in the culture. The following figure is an example of the text-based chat which occurred between two of the girls in this study. [The girls are playing with a further convention in the points of ellipses (.....) to indicate, perhaps, a knowing silent smile or a long stare.]

Figure 4: Playing with language (11 May 2002)

The talk was recorded as the girls sat next to each other in the real cybercafe whilst virtually sitting next to each other as Habbos in Habbohotel. In their talk about Habbohotel, the girls defined particular positions for themselves through expressing preferences for clothes, hairstyle, skin-colour and types of music. To be accepted within particular social circles the users had to choose appearances which were acceptable within current dominant discourse. Choices made from the limited menus (when designing a Habbo, for example), were seen as important to interactions in cyberspace, as can be seen in this excerpt of conversation between Helena and Natalie as they continue their job hunt:

- 1 HELENA: you know what? they only offer people who look good jobs, and it depends on what they think looks good
2 NATALIE: we look good
3 HELENA: ok
4 NATALIE: enough (laugh) a little bit
5 HELENA: you know what you're going to look like in a swimming costume cuz it still has the hat on it's really funny cuz you've got the swimming costume and the hat it's really funny I'll show you

In line 1, Helena is cautiously explaining that people in the Habbohotel judge other participants according to their looks. She qualifies the statement by saying that it is all subjective ('it depends on what they think looks good'). In line 2 Natalie states her opinion that she has chosen good-looking features for her Habbo, but Helena's less than enthusiastic agreement ('ok') prompts Natalie to add 'enough' (i.e. her Habbo looks good enough to get a job), and when Helena still does not respond positively, Natalie says her Habbo looks 'a little bit (good)'. Helena now has the chance to tell Natalie why her Habbo might not look very good, and she can do this without contradicting or insulting Natalie and in line 5 Helena explains that Habbos who have been designed with hats look 'funny' when wearing swimming costume. This interaction shows a small instance when the importance of appearance is acknowledged, and Helena, the older girl, can be interpreted as playing the older, more senior advice figure. An interesting feature of this conversation is how tentative the girls are in expressing opinions, an element of girls' talk which has been noted in other research (Willett, 2002). Helena couldn't come out and say that Natalie didn't look good and that's why she didn't get a job. She artfully negotiates a way of getting Natalie to suggest that there might be something wrong with her Habbo's appearance. Although at first Natalie expresses a strong opinion, she quickly backs down and negotiates a shared opinion with Helena. This way of negotiating an agreed opinion is an example of how the girls are learning to 'do girl', in this case, in relation to expressing opinions with other girls (Butler 1990, McRobbie 1994).

Sexuality

One of the most noticeable types of interaction was the performance of heterosexual desire. There are several recordings of girls chasing boys or even 'fighting over boys'. This kind of interaction is described in accounts of playground behaviour, such as Barrie Thorne's *Gender Play* (1993). Such cross-gender play is described by Thorne as a way of establishing:

gender boundaries' which 'when evoked...are accompanied by stylised forms of action, a sense of performance, mixed and ambiguous meanings...and by an array of intense emotions (1993:66).

The interactions observed in chatrooms seem to firmly grounded in such games as 'kiss-chase' or 'catch-and-kiss'. When 'chasing' a 'boy Habbo', the girls would squeal with delight ('I'm with him, I am, I am I'm with him'), they would talk about the boys' looks and they would tell the boy that they loved him and wanted to kiss him. They would tell their friends (in the 'real' cybercafe) who were in the same chatroom to stay away, as Sasha said to Aimee (screen name 'aghectic'):

you lot need to go, this is my man, I'm already chattin to him, do you understand what I'm sayin? Uh uh aghectic you need to move yourself.

These interactions fit with Thorne's description of 'kiss-chase' as forms of 'stylised actions' containing 'a sense of performance' – here underscored by the adoption of Americanised Black language styles. When the girls were playing this sort of 'kiss-chase' they would come out with statements such as 'it's fun to fight over a man', confirming that the girls were seeing their chatroom interactions as a game they were playing. The expressions of love and desire to kiss also fit with Thorne's description of kiss-chase being accompanied by 'ambiguous meanings'. Kissing can take on a form of aggression in spite of being couched in terms of intimacy.

This sexualised discourse not only established the girls in terms of sexual preferences (they are positioning themselves as heterosexuals) but also in terms of gender and age. Thorne describe 'kiss-chase' play as a way of setting boundaries between boys and girls, of defining who is a girl/boy and what it means to be a girl or boy. The girls in chatrooms carve out a particular way of 'doing girl', and more specifically doing 'pre-adolescent girl', not only through flirtatious behaviour but also through a way of talking, expressing their opinions and to some extent establishing a particular power relationship with boys. The girls' talk includes statements about how to evaluate boys ('he's really thick' 'eww he's nasty find someone cuter' 'he's a boring old man'). This way of insulting boys (however anonymously), does several things: it gives the girls a position which separates them from the boys, it gives the girls a way of talking about boys and it puts them in the powerful position of being able to decide whether or not to interact with boys.

Risk taking and taboo topics

Chasing boys around Habbohotel was only one type of overtly heterosexual activity. The girls also engaged in chat with boys which reflected the girls' desires to take risks and play with taboo topics, namely around sexual relations. The girls frequently told 'boys' (one can only assume they were boys, as it's impossible to know who the other chatroom users were) that they loved them, a way of procuring a 'best friend' or someone whom they could rely on to talk to in Habbohotel. These pronouncements of love were often followed by limited conversations (finding out 'a/s/l', discussing what music they liked, and moving around rooms together). The following extract shows how frivolous the girls are when proclaiming love. In this extract Helena and Rebekah are sitting next to

Natalie who is checking her messages on her Habboconsole. She has received several from a boy called Ant:

NATALIE: oh my gosh I just got another one
REBEKAH: (reads) do you still love me? Ant
ALL: awwwww
HELENA: that is so sweet, where's he from
NATALIE: I don't know (laughs)
HELENA: ask him, say where are you from, you have to tell him you still love him first
NATALIE: I just want to get money
HELENA: OHHHH
REBEKAH: well it is her goal so it should be pretty obvious
NATALIE: yes it is

Ant's interest in love is described as 'sweet' by Helena, whilst Natalie admits that she doesn't know where he is from. Natalie has previously said she loves Ant, but now she seems more interested in finding a job than finding love.

Proclamations of love are sometimes accompanied by sexual requests, as in this excerpt in which Sasha and Aimee are participating in Habbohotel. Sasha has found a boy, Jordy, in whom she is interested:

SASHA: wanna do some kissing luv? (*Sasha says this as she tries to decide what to write*)
AIMEE: I love you wanna do some kissing (*Aimee says this as a suggestion for what Sasha should write*)
SASHA: let's see his reaction
...
AIMEE: why what did he say to you?
SASHA: nothing
AIMEE: this room is crap let's go to the lido
SASHA: one minute
AIMEE: go lido 2 lido 2
SASHA: Jordy one minute Jordy I'm going to say can we go to the closet
AIMEE: I know they walk into the closet ya and it turns pink ya and it goes nnnnn
SASHA: (laughs)
AIMEE: I'm not joking, look go into the closet

The 'closet' to which the girls are referring is actually a transporter that takes the user to another room. Sasha and Aimee have seen Habbos go into the closet together, so they think it is someplace Habbos go to have 'intimate relations'. Sasha and Aimee participated on the 2-day course in which girls designed (on paper) their ideal chatrooms. This design featured an 'intimate relations room' where users would go into closets together and come out pregnant, so we can interpret the excerpt above as Aimee telling Sasha to have sex with Jordy! This risk taking with sexually charged discourse, and the experimentation around the taboo topic of sex is one element of the girls' play and learning in chat rooms,

and again it is a subtly inflected kind of play. Garvey (1977) has a category of play called 'playing with rules' in which she describes 'testing the limits' as a type of play. She writes:

by playfully violating conventions or testing limits - especially those imposed by the consensus of the peer group - a child not only extends the knowledge of his (sic) own capabilities but also learns about the nature of social rule systems. (1977:106)

There are a number of examples of this kind of 'play', some of which are much more sexually explicit. It is these kinds of interactions, as we suggested in our introduction, which raise questions about young children's participation in chatrooms. Even the most liberal-minded observers would be forced to think carefully about the appropriateness (and safety?) of 10 year-old girls agreeing to being 'fucked from behind' in a chatroom. One could argue that playing with taboo topics is part of the way children position themselves in relation to the hierarchy of the adult world. Furthermore, risk taking is part of the process of play, an important aspect in which children learn to move away from the safety of their parents. Whilst girls are perceived to be more vulnerable in chatrooms, boys have been pathologised as susceptible to the violence of computer games. However, critics like Henry Jenkins (2000) compare the experiences of 'nineteenth century boy culture' with 'contemporary game culture'. He argues that the fundamental experiences which are common to both cultures include exploring a space which is separate from parents in order to develop 'autonomy and self-confidence', gaining peer status through daring moves, developing virtues of master and self-control, expressing aggression, and role-playing adult male roles. Jenkins describes these experiences of boys' culture as part of 'the messy process by which western culture turns boys into men' (2000:275). We need to find neutral ways of applying the quality of Jenkins' analysis to girls in chatrooms, and consider whether the sexually charged discourses with which the girls are playing can also be seen as forms of experimental play and empowerment. Whilst many schools would find this kind of play beyond limits, we can also see why such a proscription only serves to cement the view that it is these popular cultural forms which provide meaningful and serious learning opportunities for children to test out and reflect upon adult experiences.

Conclusions: Learning to play and playing to learn

Our research questions asked what we could learn from exploring children's learning in chatrooms. In particular we were intrigued to see how any such learning might contribute towards a theory of informal learning and its policy relevance for education. Our conclusions need to address both the nature of informal learning – how or if it works, and also the 'so what' implications: what is informal learning good for, does it matter?

There is no doubt that Natalie and the other children have learnt something during their experiences of visiting Habbohotel during this study. We have shown how Natalie has been initiated into, and taught how to operate the mechanics of the chatroom and what to say and do when she is there. On the one

hand we can say that this is a kind of informal learning, in that the topic and the study domain took place out of school and beyond the academy. However, we can also point to the fact that she was tutored and supported (by software and interface design as well as by people) throughout the learning process.

In what sense then is this learning informal and how might it related to other kinds of learning experienced by these girls at this stage of their life? We would suggest that are both similarities and differences between the pedagogy of popular culture, peer education and its implied opposite, formal education. Indeed one obvious but often ignored point in this discussion is that formal education itself is not homogenous or mono-modal. The preference of play-learning, through the adoption of different roles and above all, roles which have meaning and value for participants is key. The preference for other discourse styles (valuing opinion rather than theory) and the ability to approach problems from different perspectives is also important -for example, how Natalie learns from Helena through role-modelling and imitation. Thirdly we would note how experimentation within a supported structure (the software interface) allows learners to progress at their own speed, both stretching and supporting them.

It is, of course, impossible to say how or whether any the children observed might make use of these informal techniques in other contexts, or indeed if they represent transferable, discrete skills. One of the key assumptions about formal education is that it facilitates the capacity to apply knowledge and skills in other areas beyond the immediate learning context. Not only is this open to interpretation, but also we aren't sure whether informal learning would have the same outcome. Obviously our data are limited, but anyway what kind of study could really show how the mode or content of this piece of informal learning could have an impact elsewhere?

On one level, this argument seem to suggest that the more we tease away at informal learning, the more we try to define it, the more elusive the object of our study becomes. Part of the problem here is that there is no such thing as formal learning in the first place or that it is simple to define. Indeed it is only the snobbery of the academy and the misplaced assumption that popular culture has no pedagogy and requires no intellectual effort that would make findings to the contrary, at all controversial.

This is a similar conundrum to that posed by the role of play within informal learning. We have identified several kinds of play with different learning outcomes. Sutton-Smith (1997) makes the case that there is little hard evidence proving that play performs a necessarily educational function, and that the assumption that it does so is a form of rhetorical recuperation. We have demonstrated that the play with language, taboo or gender is fun and allows for experimentation, humour, flexibility and accommodation. Therefore, we have argued that this is a form of learning through play. However, does participating in a chatroom teach one to play at anything more than playing in chatrooms? Sutton-Smith is keen to argue that we learn to play in order to play, and a similar case can be made about chatrooms. Yes, we learn how to operate within them but

it is only an act of faith to suggest that such activity might meet other (more educational) ends.

Our discussion shows a level of complexity and engagement by young people in chatrooms, and this position should be helpful in assuaging some of fears about chatrooms - or they would be if such fears were grounded in rational debate (Barker and Petley 1997). However, describing participation in chatrooms as a form of learning also risks an accusation of banality. There comes a point where learning becomes as vague as breathing. Most social interaction involves some kind of learning, and popular culture motivates and offers rewards to reluctant learners in the way school does not. But this is not to say that there is a qualitative difference between formal and informal learning. The project has excavated an energy and an engagement with a demonised form of popular culture, and this is an important corrective. However, it is equally important in this field of study not to over-state the case for the defence and, in the end, show where learning begins and ends.

Notes

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