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Learning in parking lots: Affinity spaces as a framework for understanding knowledge construction in informal settings



Anthony D. Neely*, Vittorio Marone

University of Texas at San Antonio, Department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching, 1 UTSA Circle, San Antonio, TX 78249, United States

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ABSTRACT

Before, during, and after concerts, fans of The Grateful Dead, Phish, Widespread Panic, and other improvisation-oriented jam bands, gather in venues' parking lots to share experiences, debate band related lore, buy and sell fan made goods, listen to music, and participate in numerous other scene-related activities. The interaction within these spaces, and with these spaces, fosters the social construction of knowledge, language, skills, norms, behaviors, and identities. By applying Gee's construct of "affinity space," this article analyzes the different trajectories to learning and participation associated with one the most influential fandoms in the United States. The conceptualization of parking lots as affinity spaces sheds lights on informal learning practices experienced in physical settings that transcend the affordances offered by virtual communities, social media, and, more broadly, computer-mediated communication. Focusing on situated learning endeavors enacted in jam band parking lots in relation to formal educational practices, this study advocates for a renewed and joined approach to education and fandom studies through a sociocultural lens.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to conceptually explore a form of physical affinity space (jam band parking lots) through the dimension of learning. Gee's framework of "affinity space" (Gee, 2004) is proposed as a conceptual and practical tool to make sense of affinity-driven interactions and social learning in jam band parking lots. These contexts have previously been studied from the perspectives of business and social psychology, but there is a lack of interdisciplinary studies examining what kind of learning occurs in such environments and how this takes place. The goal of the article is to suggest new venues for research on virtual and physical affinity spaces, and how they can be analyzed and compared through insights from rarely considered interdisciplinary perspectives of fandom studies, popular culture research, and learning sciences. More broadly, the purpose of this article is to find tools for understanding informal learning in physical affinity spaces and contribute to the agenda for future studies of informal learning environments.

2. Jam band parking lots

Before, during, and after concerts, fans of The Grateful Dead, their associated acts (e.g., Furthur, Phil & Friends, Ratdog), Phish, Widespread Panic, and other jam bands (musical groups that blend different styles and include extended improvisations, or "jams," in their live performances), flock to venues' parking lots to share experiences, construct fantasy set lists, debate band related lore, buy and sell fan-made goods, listen to music, and participate in numerous other communal activities (Hunt, 2008). This

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: anthonydneely@gmail.com (A.D. Neely), vittorio.marone@utsa.edu (V. Marone).

tradition, characterized by a carnivalesque and bazaar-like atmosphere, was popularized by Deadheads (i.e., fans of The Grateful Dead) in the mid-1960s, and has become a seminal ritual within jam band fan culture (Hunt, 2008; Pattacini, 2000).

Although the relationship between jam band fan culture and parking lots has previously been examined from academic lenses such as business (Sheptoski, 2000) and social psychology (Hunt, 2008), this paper provides a novel interdisciplinary framework that connects fandom studies, popular culture research, and learning sciences. Specifically, this study conceptualizes jam band parking lots as physical affinity spaces, or sites in which people who share a common interest participate in informal social and learning activities (Gee, 2004; Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012). The paper draws on Gee's framework of affinity spaces, educational research, and the authors' experiences as teachers and participants in tens of jam band concerts and related parking lots gatherings (one of the authors).

3. Learning as situated participation

In their typology of learning, Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds (2009) propose learning does not occur in a vacuum, but rather is a social endeavor in which “learners are influenced by, and at the same time push back, take from, change, control, and create the environment in which learning is situated” (p. 180). This view poses teaching and learning within a situated, constructivist, and socio-cultural framework. Socioculturalism is a theory and philosophical approach to learning influenced by the work of Lev S. Vygotsky (1978) that posits knowledge, skills, and abilities are constructed through social interactions with others. This framework holds that learning is optimized when a novice learner interacts with a more knowledgeable peer, or a person who possesses more advanced knowledge and skills. Learning, therefore, is not intended merely as the processing and acquisition of information, but rather as an identity-formation process in which the individual explores and discovers the world by means of social interaction and appropriation of meaning-making practices, signs, and tools of any given culture (Bruner, 1996; Smagorinsky, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). In this sense, learning can be better understood as a situated and active form of participation shaped by the interactions among learners and the context of learning (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996; Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009; Sfard, 1998).

According to Eshach (2007), learning can occur in three modes: formal, non-formal, and informal. Formal learning refers to a transmission of knowledge based around an established curriculum with defined objectives in which learning is measured through set, often quantitative, means. The traditional compulsory school setting is the most salient example of formal learning. In this context, a teacher helps students develop specific knowledge, skills, and abilities that align with a pre-determined curriculum with measured outcomes.

Non-formal learning is a “planned but highly adaptable” (Eshach, 2007, p. 173) endeavor that takes place in institutions and organizations outside of traditional school settings. An example of non-formal learning is attending a song writing workshop organized by a local church. In this setting, learning activities and presentations are designed by a more knowledgeable other (e.g., an expert lyricist); however, there is no formal assessment of attendees' learning or mastery of objectives.

Informal learning refers to the unstructured and often learner-guided construction of knowledge that can occur anywhere and at any time (Eshach, 2007). In informal learning settings, no formal curricula are implemented or followed. Learning objectives and activities are voluntarily established by each individual learner. Further, learning in such environments involves the use of shared cognition, tool manipulation, contextualized reasoning, and situation-specific competencies, as opposed to individual cognition, pure mentation, symbol manipulation, and generalized learning, which are typical of formal learning settings such as school (Resnick, 1987).

While they can occur independently as poles on a learning continuum, these three forms of learning often overlap (i.e., occur simultaneously) in one's education (Folkestad, 2006). One such example that demonstrates this intersecting relationship is learning to play a musical instrument. While classically trained musicians pursue formal education in conservatories or private lessons (i.e., formal learning) most who also play popular music further hone their craft through more informal means such as improvisational jamming with friends or figuring out riffs by repeatedly playing along with their favorite albums (Green, 2002). In her study exploring the relationship between formal and informal learning in music education, Green (2008) contends an informal approach to learning a musical instrument helps young musicians build strong bonds with others by practicing and writing songs together, learn to play multiple genres of music (e.g., rock, country, funk), and expand their abilities to critique music. Green (2008) also contends students who develop their musicianship via informal means tend to demonstrate a deep passion for music, internal motivation to practice, and high levels of enjoyment. Likewise, formal training has external influences (e.g., parents, instructors) who encourage rehearsal, proper technique, and hold young musicians accountable for expanding their knowledge, skills, and abilities through proficiency and theory exams, and recitals (Folkestad, 2006; Green, 2008). Attending a song writing workshop was presented above as an example of non-formal learning in expanding musical aptitude. The present paper primarily discusses formal and informal learning environments.

One instance of informal learning in social environments is the participation within communities of practice, in which members with different levels of expertise and experience learn from each other by sharing competences and negotiating meanings (Lave & Wenger, 1991). While the construct of “community of practice” has well served the understanding and conceptualization of informal learning practices in professional settings, the related framework of “affinity space” was introduced by Gee (2004, 2005) in order to make sense of interest-driven social environments in which participants engage in passionate, self-directed, and intrinsically motivating activities. According to Gee (2005), the framework of communities of practice can be problematic outside professional or formal learning contexts. First, the idea of “community” recalls notions of belonging and personal ties among people. Second, being part of a community requires some kind of “membership,” which is a term too vague to describe different,

and differently perceived, forms of participation. Third, since its origin, the concept of “community of practice” has been adopted by scholars, practitioners, and media to describe a great variety of social affiliations, that it is now hard to identify what it stands for in representing such affiliations. Last, this construct, and similar frameworks based on the idea of community, tend to label groups of people. Gee, instead, refocuses the attention to the *spaces* in which such interactions occur and the shared *interests and passions* that propel them, putting forth the framework of affinity spaces, which will be discussed in the following section.

4. Learning in affinity spaces

Affinity spaces are informal sites in which people with a shared interest (or affinity) engage in social, creative, and learning practices (Gee, 2004; Lammers et al., 2012; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). Gee (2005) contends that affinity spaces are distinct from other informal learning contexts, such as communities of practice, because engagement in these spaces has no formal membership requirements. This openness promotes the presence of a broad demographic of passionate participants who populate a shared space exclusively, or to a large extent, because of their common interest. Although affinity spaces are most commonly discussed within the context of virtual environments (e.g., message boards, web forums, fandom-oriented websites), they can also manifest as physical sites in which participants interact face-to-face (Gee, 2004; Lammers et al., 2012). Gee (2005, pp. 225–228) identifies eleven defining characteristics of affinity spaces:

1. Common endeavor, not race, class, gender, or disability, is primary.
2. Newbies and masters and everyone else share common space.
3. Some portals are strong generators.
4. Internal grammar is transformed by external grammar.
5. Encourages intensive and extensive knowledge.
6. Encourages individual and distributed knowledge.
7. Encourages dispersed knowledge.
8. Uses and honors tacit knowledge.
9. Many different forms and routes to participation.
10. Lots of different routes to status.
11. Leadership is porous and leaders are resources.

Dahmardeh, Memar, and Memar (2014) argue that “a given culture in itself is devoid of meaning unless compared with other cultures” (p. 16). In agreement with this viewpoint, in the following sections the eleven characteristics of affinity spaces proposed by Gee are implemented to make sense of jam band culture in relation to school culture. By comparing and contrasting trajectories of learning in jam band parking lots and traditional classrooms we want to stress key ideas and differences between the two environments. Of course, these considerations do not apply to all classes or jam band events, nor they represent all formal and informal environments, but they can be instrumental in analyzing and making sense of different cultures and “ways of learning.” Further, Gee’s framework is utilized to understand how cultural competence, which refers to the complex interplay between beliefs, knowledge, feelings, attitudes and behaviors (Wallace, 1988), is constructed and developed in the two spaces (jam band parking lots and school classrooms).

4.1. Common endeavor, not race, class, gender, or disability, is primary

Rather than demographic characteristics such as age or socially constructed identity markers (e.g., race, class, gender), affinity spaces emphasize the role of the shared interest that brings people together (Gee, 2005). In jam band fan culture, the affinity toward a specific band (or the jam band music genre at large) draws participants to parking lots before, during, and after their concerts. No matter their age, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality or how different they may be in other areas of their lives (e.g., level of education, occupation, or socioeconomic status), all participants are welcome in parking lots, due to their shared interest and passion for jam bands. While in formal educational contexts instructors’ expectations that based on demographic or socially-constructed qualities can influence their interactions with learners (Schunk, 2012), in affinity spaces the focus on a shared interest allows for interactions that are primarily participation-oriented.

4.2. Newbies and masters and everyone else share common space

Cognitive apprenticeship is a method of learning in which experts and novices are communally engaged in a shared task embedded in an authentic context (Dennen, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991) influenced by social, cultural, and historical factors (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). In affinity spaces, the *shared task* is replaced by a *shared interest*, which is conducive to an affinity that engenders authentic practices, like those exhibited in parking lots at jam band concerts. The engagement with such practices “involves the whole person, both acting and knowing at once” (Wenger, 1998, pp. 47–48) in “a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging” (p. 56), as participants socially construct knowledge, negotiate meanings, and develop a contextualized identity (Gee, 2004; Lave, 1996). Lave and Wenger (1991) describe this process as *legitimate peripheral participation*, or the gradual passage from peripheral to full participation, as more experienced members accept, endorse, and support new ones. Affinity spaces provide a shared space that promotes interaction between newcomers and veterans, which facilitates, but does not require, the transition from one status to the other. In jam band fan culture, parking lots are cohabitated by diehard fans who have seen a

band tens of times and are heavily embedded in the culture, casual fans who occasionally listen to the band or see them in concert, and people who have never listened to the band. This heterogeneous compound promotes intersubjective and multidirectional communications among people with different levels of knowledge and experience (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Wertsch, 1991), thus stimulating reciprocal (Bandura, 1986) and apprenticeship-oriented (Rogoff, 1990) forms of learning mediated by the informal environment. In this space, participants receive and offer *unconditional positive regard* (Bozarth, 2007), which is often lacking in formal learning environments, for example between students (e.g., cliques, competitiveness, bullying), students and teachers (e.g., unidirectional control, unalterable separation of roles, generational divide), and teachers and policymakers (e.g. physical distance, ideological dissension, reciprocal lack of understanding of needs and responsibilities). In this context, the unstructured, welcoming, and generally nonjudgmental milieu of parking lots facilitates social interaction and social integration by offering opportunities for different levels of participation. The fluid transition from *anticipation* (before the concert), *participation* (during the concert), and *release* (after the concert) contributes to creating a vibrant space in which learning and socializing, buying and sharing, listening and singing, become unified (an unifying) experiences.

4.3. Some portals are strong generators

Gee refers to “portals” as ways of accessing and interacting with an interest on one’s own or with others. Such interactions become a sign of one’s relationship with an interest and its related community. Gee (2005) shares the example of fans of a specific video game who play the game in single or multiplayer mode, visit game related websites, and purchase books about the game. He then goes on to state that these portals, although not required, can become generators or platforms for creating and modifying portals. For instance, a gamer may write software code for new levels or quests in a video game to share with others online, thereby modifying how fans interact with the game itself.

Within jam band fan culture parking lots offer numerous ways for fans to interact and show their relationship to their shared interest. Fans loudly play music by the band from their car stereos, wear band related clothing (e.g., T-shirts, hats), or join jam sessions in which multiple fans come together to play songs by the band. These portals, have the potential to become generators. For example, “tapers”, i.e. people who audio record concerts, may give away copies of concerts they have captured to other fans. Vendors may create new band-related merchandise using input and feedback they receive from fans. Inspired by popular jam bands, musicians may come together to create tribute bands that perform songs by such bands (e.g., Dark Star Orchestra, A Live One). Traditionally closed classroom settings may benefit from this approach by encouraging and facilitating access to “portals” through which students may connect in-class content with external resources, for example, by creating and sharing artifacts (e.g., uploading student-generated video lessons on YouTube), connecting school activities to their personal interests (e.g., writing fan fiction on dedicated websites), and contributing to knowledge repositories and social media (e.g., improving/updating pages on Wikipedia).

4.4. Internal grammar is transformed by external grammar

What happens within an affinity space can affect the interest itself, and vice versa. Or, in other words, the internal (central) grammar of the interest can be transformed by the external (peripheral) grammar engendered by the participants of such interest. For example, jam band fans may start grassroots campaigns in concert parking lots encouraging a band to play a rarely performed song, such as The Grateful Dead’s “Unbroken Chain.” Often these campaigns continue into the venue with the display of fan-made banners and the chanting of song titles or lyrics. Such a campaign occurred in the Phish community during the 2003 summer tour when fans campaigned for the band to play the song “Fluffhead.” During one concert of that tour, Trey Anastasio, guitarist for Phish, acknowledged the campaign by announcing to the crowd that the band’s bass player, Mike Gordon, did not want to play the song (Zerbo & Toscano, 2014). Anastasio’s statement popularized a new slogan within Phish fandom, “Mike says no.” This saying appeared on many web-based memes and was printed on T-shirts and bumper stickers sold by vendors in parking lots and web stores. To fans’ delight, “Fluffhead” was the first song performed by Phish upon returning from their five year hiatus on March 6, 2009 (Zerbo & Toscano, 2014). From this perspective, parking lots serve as legitimized and transformative peripheries of jam bands, in an ecosystem that reshapes its culture through activity and participation. On the other hand, oftentimes formal learning environments lack the fluid, reciprocal, and “democratic” habitat of affinity spaces, since the academic apparatus rarely allows students’ voices to emerge (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2001, 2007; Taylor & Parsons, 2011), influence the selection or design of curricula, and contribute to reshaping learning trajectories, classroom ecology, school culture, and the educational system at large.

4.5. Encourages intensive and extensive knowledge

Participants in an affinity space may have intensive (i.e., specialized, yet narrow) or extensive (i.e., unspecialized, yet broad) knowledge about a given interest. In jam band fan culture, fans express both types of knowledge. For example, fans of The Grateful Dead who exhibit extensive knowledge may be able to recall the dates of concerts commonly identified as seminal performances by the band, know the origins of band related emblems such as the “stealie” or dancing bears, or be able to name all of the keyboard players who performed with the band throughout their career. Deadheads with intensive knowledge may have great knowledge about a specific element of the band. For example, they may be experts on the history of Jerry Garcia’s various guitars (e.g., Alligator, Tiger, Wolf), the careers of related luthiers (e.g., Doug Irwin, Travis Bean, Stephen Cripe), types of woods used in the guitars, modifications performed to electronics throughout Garcia’s ownership, and other instrument-specific

knowledge. As in other affinity spaces, Deadheads find value in both extensive and intensive knowledge and share such knowledge with other participants in their parking lot gatherings. This approach can significantly differ from formal academic settings in which learners are expected to reach the same desired level of knowledge within a specified timeframe, by following a standardized curriculum, rather than interest-driven aspirations at one's own pace. Further, participants in affinity spaces who are considered "experts" may have an extensive knowledge of the fandom or a more specific domain knowledge related to discrete elements of such fandom (e.g., guitar models and specifications). In parking lots meetings, both forms of knowledge are valued and developed through social interaction.

4.6. *Encourages individual and distributed knowledge*

Participation in an affinity space allows one to develop her own knowledge and access the knowledge possessed by other participants through networking and sharing of resources. Drawing on Vygotskian (1978) principles of learning as a sociocultural endeavor, Gee states that distributed knowledge "allows people to know and do more than they could on their own" (Gee, 2005, p. 227). In jam band fan culture, a fan might develop an idea for merchandise, such as a novel band-inspired T-shirt, to sell in parking lots before and after concerts. This idea could become reality by leveraging the distributed knowledge of the affinity space in which participants have extensive knowledge of jam band culture and specialized knowledge of graphic design, manufacturing, packaging, branding, distribution, and promotion. Further, informal interactions among participants in parking lots can contribute to the understanding of copyright issues, merchandise formats, insider's fashion trends, and fans' tastes, transforming the affinity space into a multidimensional and distributed source for learning, entrepreneurship, and creativity. While "the dominant form of school learning and performance is individual" (Resnick, 1987, p. 13) and all students in a class are expected to achieve the same level of competence in the same field (i.e., the subject matter), affinity spaces are distributed activity systems in which knowledge, skills, and learning trajectories are socially constructed and shared.

4.7. *Encourages dispersed knowledge*

Gee (2005) argues that affinity spaces encourage participants to access and utilize knowledge outside of this environment. Just as a person who visits a famous Civil War battlefield may be urged to read seminal books about the battle that occurred on the site or to view documentaries about said battle, participants in jam band fan culture seek knowledge about a specific band or jam band culture outside of a venue's parking lot, inspired by social encounters or personal explorations within that realm. For example, in addition to parking lots, fans of The Grateful Dead construct and share knowledge about the band on web forums (e.g., dead.net), research various books published about the band on dedicated websites (e.g., gratefuldeadbooks.com), or attend conferences with special interest groups related to the study of the band and its related culture (e.g., The Grateful Dead Scholars' Caucus at the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association's annual conference, <http://southwestpca.org>). In other words, an affinity space is an environment for participants to acquire and disseminate knowledge, skills, and abilities within and outside of such space, and parking lot interactions can become springboards for external explorations. As opposed to traditionally "closed" classroom environments, affinity spaces can be considered internetworked places (Hunter, 2002) that support the construction of knowledge bridges between physical and virtual environments, thus expanding the opportunities for the development of extensive, intensive, personal, and distributed forms of knowledge.

4.8. *Uses and honors tacit knowledge*

Tacit knowledge refers to knowledge, skills, and abilities that one gains from experience, but may not be able to put into words (Gee, 2005). Many people are able to perform a task well or have extensive knowledge about a topic, but may not be able to verbalize how or why they do/know it. For example, a basketball player may be able to effortlessly make free throws, but cannot explain how she does it. Her coach may be able to break down her shot by discussing the angle of her release or her elbow positioning, but to the athlete she is simply shooting baskets. Oftentimes, in formal learning settings tacit knowledge is disregarded because "not verifiable." On the other hand, affinity spaces offer several opportunities for developing, refining, and applying such knowledge. In jam band fan culture, tacit knowledge is exhibited in parking lots through predicting the difficulty of acquiring tickets to upcoming concerts, identifying various categories of fans within the culture at large (e.g., *wooks*, *tour rats*, *custies*, *spinners*, *hoopers*), being able to live out of a vehicle for extended periods of time, and developing insider specialist language that allows fans to communicate with each other in ways outsiders likely would not comprehend (Hayes & Lee, 2012; Woodward-Kron, 2008). In other words, tacit knowledge is an ineffable, yet foundational component of the jam band affinity space and it contributes to the formation of a distinctive skills and identities enacted in situated interactions and events.

4.9. *Many different forms and routes to participation*

Affinity spaces allow participants multiple ways to interact and share ideas over varied durations of time and levels of involvement. Within jam band fan culture, some fans attend a single event and view the parking lot as a location to listen to music with others before a concert, while others follow a band for an entire tour and develop a strong sense of community with others who they interact with in parking lots from city to city. These social and learning relationships are often characterized by genuine interest and affinity-driven emotions (Bruner, 1986; Renshaw, 2013). Further still, while some concertgoers visit "Shakedown

Street” (a moniker taken from a Grateful Dead song used for the portion of a parking lot in which vendors set up to sell their wares, Sheptoski, 2000) to purchase a meal or band-related piece of merchandise to commemorate their attendance at a show, many vendors make their livelihood selling food or goods in the parking lots during a tour. The freedom to enter and exit the space at will allows concertgoers to participate how and when they choose. While in school there are basically two roles one can play to participate in a learning activity (either the student or the teacher), in jam band parking lots and fan culture there are several routes and roles to participating and learning from each other: fans of different ages, backgrounds, and levels of experience, casual attendees, musicians, roadies, journalists, critics, vendors, ticket sellers, bootleg recorders, graphic artists, web designers, community managers, and more, all take part in, and, at the same time, construct the dynamic and multifaceted environment of the affinity space.

4.10. Lots of different routes to status

Jam band parking lots offer different routes to construct positive or negative status within the community. Positive reputations may be associated with having well designed merchandise or delicious food to sell on Shakedown Street, having a consistent track record of accurate insider knowledge about future tour dates, or constructive participation in other “portals” dedicated to the interest, such as online blogs or discussion forums. Inversely, if one sells poorly-made merchandise or food that makes concertgoers ill, spreads false rumors about a band, or “trolls” (trolling is defined as “the attempt to hurt, humiliate, annoy, or provoke in order to elicit an emotional response for one’s own enjoyment,” Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014, p. 372) community-related web forums, they may develop a negative reputation.

While schools offer different routes to gain “status” (good grades, success in athletics, etc.), most of these paths are determined through top-down decisions and evaluations performed by institutional figures (a teacher assessing the performance of a student, a coach selecting players for the team, etc.), in jam band fan culture status is achieved through peer-recognition. Further, “status” in this culture is associated with practices of reciprocal teaching and sharing, as well as feelings of a shared affinity, that allow for different routes to learning and participation.

4.11. Leadership is porous and leaders are resources

Although affinity spaces do not have set bosses or leaders who can “order people around or create rigid, unchanging and impregnable hierarchies” (Gee, 2005, p. 228), participants’ status is connected to their ability of becoming valuable resources for the community. Within jam band fan culture, such leaders may be individuals with close ties to the band and its management, seasoned vendors who often influence where Shakedown Street will be set up, web designers for band-related websites and blogs, and “old school heads,” or fans who have followed a band since its infancy. As opposed to traditional school settings, in which teacher-student roles are predetermined, non-interchangeable, and non-negotiable, in affinity spaces informal authority figures have no title or power that can moderate how and when others participate or maintain the status quo within the community. Instead, their role is recognized because of their contribution to building knowledge and opportunities for social interaction and development. Research shows that interactions in which the roles of “expert” and “novice” are not predetermined, but rather dynamically change in a dialogic and bidirectional way, can be beneficial to learning and development (Frankel, 2012; Wells, 2002). In this context, in affinity spaces leadership is porous and distributed, as some participants are considered points of reference in specific areas of expertise or situations, while others are valued for their overall contribution to the well-being and advancement of the community. This is not to say that jam band fan culture is free from conflict, factions, or varying degrees of institutionalization, but rather that in the context of informal teaching and learning in parking lots, leadership and influence are derived more so from personal power (e.g., experience, reputation, knowledge) than position power (e.g., having a formal title within an organizational hierarchy) (French & Raven, 1959; Robbins & Judge, 2013).

5. Implications and conclusions

Conceptualizing jam band parking lots as affinity spaces, in which learning occurs through situated and interest-driven interactions, connects contemporary education scholarship to fan culture studies. While fandom literature generally examines the socially constructed norms and practices of a given culture, there is a lack of studies examining how learning occurs in such environments through an affinity space lens in relation to formal educational practices and settings. Considering this gap, this study suggests new venues for research to examine not only the relationships between formal and informal learning environments, but also the interactions between virtual affinity spaces (e.g., online discussion forums with text-based exchanges) and physical affinity spaces (i.e., outdoor and indoor gathering places in which people communicate face-to-face). Such investigations can further the understanding of how learners negotiate their identities in formal and informal settings, as well as between their “virtual selves” and their “physical selves,” across different domains that involve different cultural tools, settings, and practices.

By conceptualizing affinity-driven interaction and situated learning in jam band fan culture through the lens of Gee’s framework of affinity spaces, this study opens up the door for future interdisciplinary explorations of teaching and learning in fandom cultures, and how these communities develop and spread. Viewing parking lots as affinity spaces provides researchers with new avenues for empirical research that explores not only *what* is learned in these settings, but also *how* this is experienced by its participants and how it can inform formal educational practices.

The educational implications of this study evolve around the potential of “alternative” learning practices and spaces and how they can inform institutionalized learning enterprises. In this sense, this study engenders several constructive questions that can connect, rather than divide, formal and informal learning settings. These questions reflect the eleven characteristics of affinity spaces and have the potential to ignite and inspire “affinity thinking” in the field of education and beyond: How can policymakers and teachers rethink the traditional classroom by de-emphasizing the (oft dividing) role of age, ethnicity, gender and other socially-constructed markers? How can the concept of “newbies” and “masters” in a shared space contribute to overcoming generational (students/teachers) and professional (teachers/policymakers) divides? How can classrooms become “open portals” and “internetworked places” actively connected to external informal learning sites? How can teachers create new opportunities for students to contribute to reshaping learning trajectories, classroom ecology, and school culture? How can school curricula facilitate the development of intensive, extensive, individual, distributed, dispersed, and tacit knowledge? What novel routes to participation, status, mastery, and leadership can school offer to students?

In conclusion, this article proposes Gee's framework of affinity spaces (with its eleven characteristics) as a conceptual and practical tool to make sense of affinity-driven interactions and situated learning in oft-overlooked, yet surprisingly rich informal settings, such as jam band parking lots. By recognizing the learning experiences occurring in these spaces, considering them in relation to formal educational environments and practices, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers can advance a shared understanding of how learning and teaching occurs through meaningful social and cultural interactions in informal contexts. In turn, this knowledge can inform the design of new curricula, programs, methods, spaces, and activities grounded on students' interests, passions, and affinities.

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