

Book Review | *Affinity Online: How Connection and Shared Interest Fuel Learning*, by Mizuko Ito, Crystle Martin, Rachel Cody Pfister, Matthew H. Rafalow, Katie Salen, and Amanda Wortman (New York University Press, 2019)

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Schools have been slow to respond to the growing importance of digital communities in many students' lives. Ito et al. investigate how educators might connect diverse students' digital experiences to curricular, civic, or career-related aims in equitable ways. *Affinity Online: How Connection and Shared Interest Fuel Learning* explores the value of online communities or affinity networks—spaces on the internet where like-minded users can gather to connect with one another and develop their shared interests. Online affinity networks “provide opportunities that are self-selected and intentional, and that are also tied to contributions to social communities and authentic recognition in these communities” (17). Ito et al. believe that these connections and the accompanying recognition provide opportunities for learning that are more meaningful than “much of the learning that young people encounter in school” (17). The cases featured in the book include examples of online affinity networks where users gather digitally to learn about fanfiction, crafting, online gaming, sports, anime, vlogging, and dance.

The investigations of these cases aim to support educators, parents, and researchers concerned with how education can be improved by internet-related technologies, specifically the kinds of online communities described in the book. The authors discuss this as *connected learning* and use the term for their goal of “realizing a world where all young people are able to fully engage in learning and

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opportunities tied to [i.e. *connected* to] their interests and passions” (4). Connected learning holds that “learning is resilient and meaningful when it is tied to social relationships and cultural identities, and when it spans in-school and out-of-school settings” (3). The cases explored in this book capture instances of connected learning with online affinity networks that the authors identify as effective, positive, and representing a diverse group of internet users. They investigate these cases through a combination of “critical ethnography, survey research, and design research” (10). Nonetheless, the book’s discussion is oriented more towards “design and advocacy than traditional scholarly social scientific discourse” (10). This approach limits the authors’ attempts to critically assess connected learning, for instance by failing to meaningfully engage with how marginalized internet users’ identities may relate to their experience accessing and seeking recognition in online affinity networks.

Affinity Online frames its discussion as addressing diverse youth populations’ experiences of the internet in ways that reflect a wide variety of interests. By “diverse,” the authors are referring to their inclusion of both “the dominant culture of digital elites” (15) as well as “youth historically underrepresented in online affinity networks” (15)—“specifically girls and black and Latino youth” (15). Even with a diverse range of cases though, the book’s discussion fails to unpack issues it introduces—like the inequitable access different populations have to the internet, or the ways that discrimination may differently impact marginalized users. Instead, the text generically notes problematic dynamics in these networks—for example, “bad behavior, trolling,...unproductive forms of criticism and feedback...[and] ‘griefing,’ which is when players destroy each other’s creations or steal from one another” (180)—and glosses over them by suggesting that “communities with positive learning dynamics all have norms and mechanisms to guard against” (180) these unruly ways of participating. The authors claim that the problem is not about the technologies and the internet itself but “the specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts of their uptake” (5). Further scholarly and community work is needed, therefore, to unpack both the problematic potential opened by digital technologies and how to navigate the related contexts in which they are used.

In *Affinity Online*’s first chapter, authors introduce the value of online affinity networks and give context for the cases investigated throughout the book. The cases included are used to promote existing instances of connected learning—involving online affinity networks—that the authors believe “can be spread and scaled to address systemic problems” (14). In this first chapter, authors introduce readers to a community of wrestling fans and to *StarCraft II* gamers. The members profiled in these cases are from diverse racial backgrounds, but their races are mentioned without an analysis of whether or how their racial identities intersect with users’ involvement in online affinity networks.

Chapter 2 discusses “the infrastructure, culture, and practices that hold online affinity networks together” (40). It mentions several types of diverse populations that may participate in these groups: “ethnic, religious, or LGBTQ” (40), “children and youth who have limited mobility” (41). Though it does mention problems that may arise in online networks—environments that are “exclusionary and unforgiving” (44) or that foster “a negative form of extremism” (44)—it does not explore how to best support minority communities in these spaces. Rather, authors claim that they can best show readers how to avoid these risks by focusing instead on networks that are not struggling with these issues: “prosocial and learning-oriented online affinity networks” (44–45). This chapter focuses on two online affinity networks—one that allows people to share fanfiction about the British boyband One Direction, and a second about Bollywood dance competitions on college campuses in the United States. This second case is the only point in *Affinity Online* where the race or national background of people profiled is explicitly explored. Members of this affinity group identified ethnic and cultural connections as a benefit they appreciated about their involvement in the online Bollywood dance competition network.

In Chapter 3, authors uncover how online affinity groups relate to cultural or “subcultural” capital. They explore “how community norms, reputation, and status are negotiated and the implications for learning” (83). The discussion suggests that members of these online networks “develop their own norms, status hierarchies, and boundary-making processes” (86) that often become exclusionary (87). Again, instead of addressing how diverse users might navigate exclusionary group dynamics, the book “sought out networks that do not have overtly exclusionary values” (87), and avoids getting into analyses of the more subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice that it mentions—like the importance of ‘good’ grammar in certain affinity communities (95). Towards the end of this chapter, the authors explicitly mention that sexist dynamics pervade many online communities, even in the cases that this book “actively sought out” (100) for their inclusivity. The authors concede that “it takes more than good intentions and a handful of positive exceptions to transform pervasive cultural hierarchies and social exclusions” (100). However, *Affinity Online* belies this conclusion by relying almost exclusively on highlighting the positive exceptions to exclusionary online networks. The authors, though, do provide one strategy that online affinity groups can try to promote more inclusivity; “provid[ing] structures that teach subcultural capital to newcomers” (100) can remove some of the barriers to entering these communities. The cases chosen in this book strive for such a model, especially the two discussed in this chapter: one around mentoring players of a video game called *LittleBigPlanet 2*, and a second about sharing anime music videos, as well as feedback and techniques for making them.

Chapter 4 outlines “how learning in online affinity networks can connect to pathways that lead to...academic, career, and civic opportunity” (125). This

chapter mentions that lacking a connection between one's identity and learning can be a barrier to development; it suggests that students from non-dominant cultures can be particularly harmed by schooling that is not connected to them in personalized ways. Authors discuss online affinity networks as providing that necessary connection "between the classroom and the wider world" (126). This chapter does not address the question of how non-dominant cultures relate to online affinity networks, except for the continued labeling of people's racial backgrounds. There is a section in this chapter about "civic engagement" (136) that discusses a Bollywood dance performance that empowered gay members of a traditionally conservative community. This anecdote, however, relates to an in-person incident, not an online interaction. Though this section falls short of addressing how online communities can support marginalized users of these networks, the two cases focused on in this chapter—a Harry Potter-themed knitting community and a community following the Nerdfighters YouTube video blog—do uncover how affinity networks on the internet can contribute to charitable actions offline.

The final chapter in the book uses the ideas and cases explored to summarize how contemporary educational opportunities might work towards connected learning. The authors suggest that for connected learning to be achieved effectively, educators and parents need to "more explicitly, intentionally, and actively" (165) connect education with young people's interests on the internet. However, realizing the authors' dream future where *all* young people are able to connect their learning to their digital interests will require more work and research into the critical issues marginalized users face in relation to online affinity networks. Practitioners, parents, and researchers must ground strategies for connected learning in further investigations of how diverse internet users may be differently able to access online groups and be recognized or validated within them. Ito et al. describe and analyze a wide sample of online affinity networks in ways that can support their inclusion—and the exploration of other similar digital spaces—in meaningful educational experiences for more students. These studies build a foundation from which to address their true concern of "better and more equitable educational futures" (6) for everyone.

Author Bio

Aron Rosenberg is a high school teacher and graduate student. He is studying how young people's experiences with digital technologies connect them to issues of social and environmental justice. Aron spent 2020 offline.