Sustaining Students’ Identities within the Context of Participatory Culture. Designing, Implementing and Evaluating an Interactive Learning Activity

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Abstract: Within the framework of theoretical developments in so-called participatory culture and the context of funds of identity, incorporated within what is known as the funds of knowledge approach, an innovative teaching methodology is implemented that allows students to actively participate in knowledge construction. The project translates into a proposal for educational contextualization and personalization based on the students’ funds of identity, that is, those resources (people, artifacts, places, activities, institutions) they consider to be most relevant and significant to define themselves. Once these have been identified through identity artifacts, such as collages or self-drawings, students link some of these funds of identity to curricular content of the subject and produce a video that shows the results of this academic work. The final product is shared on a YouTube channel containing the videos of all of the students in the class. The phases of the project are described and illustrated. We argue that the proposed teaching and learning project, which is cross-disciplinary in nature, allows for principles such as educational contextualization, funds of identity, and participatory culture to be incorporated into what we call here the funds of identity 2.0 approach, putting it into educational practice.

Keywords: funds of identity; funds of knowledge; digital media; contextualization; personalized learning; participatory culture; culturally sustaining pedagogy

1. Introduction

In recent decades, digital media have facilitated the emergence of new ways of creating, sharing and organizing knowledge, often unknown and ignored by schools and the formal contexts of teaching and learning [1-6]. Many of these revolve around popular youth culture and take the form of affiliations in online communities such as Facebook, expressions such as creating videos, multimodal and transmedial forms of writing, collaborative problem-solving to complete tasks—including certain collaborative video games—or developing new shared knowledge such as Wikipedia, as well as the dissemination of content in a blog, etc. [7-12].

Even if from a Vygotskian perspective we can consider that we are the product of the products we produce [13] (p. 13), what seems to be more relevant with regard to digital devices is not their incorporation into school practice nor the processes known as E-learning (learning through the use of digital devices), but rather their general impact on the transformation of society and the human mind [14]. In particular, the qualitative consequences they have in shaping new learning ecologies [1,15,
that is, new practices linked to teaching and learning processes (knowledge creation, dissemination and appropriation). In relation to this, the term participatory culture refers to new ways in which the “cultural product” or media and the “consumer” or user relate to one another as a result of the emergence of Web 2.0. [11,12]. The result of this is emergent cultural practices characterized by low barriers to learning, artistic expression or civic engagement based on creating and sharing experiences, and appropriating and recirculating media content fueled by peoples’ interest [17,18]. In that regard, by participatory culture it means: “a culture in which large numbers of people from all walks of life have the capacity to produce and share media with each other, often responding critically to the products of mass media, and often circulating what they create fluidly across a range of different niche publics” [19] (p. 3).

In other words, people are no longer merely observers of what is happening on television, on the computer, on the tablet or on the game console; rather we are able to participate in the production of digital media content (YouTube videos or Wikipedia entries, for example), and a third of Internet users have shared content that they themselves have produced via blogs, Facebook, YouTube, etc. [20]. In many cases, people are actively involved in processes of cultural participation (amateur design of a video game, movie, or song, often close in quality to that of a professional production). Thus, the notion of participatory culture can be considered both a description of digital cultures in a hyper-connected society—which revolves around movements and transactions [16]—and a desire or aspiration centered on accessible and public forms of cultural production and cultural participation (amateur design of a video game, movie, or song, often close in quality to that of a professional production). Thus, the notion of participatory culture can be considered both a description of digital cultures in a hyper-connected society—which revolves around movements and transactions [16]—and a desire or aspiration centered on accessible and public forms of cultural production and cultural participation (amateur design of a video game, movie, or song, often close in quality to that of a professional production).

1.1. Funds of identity 2.0

The idea of funds of identity emerges within the context of the funds of knowledge approach, which attempts to contextualize the curriculum on the basis of capitalizing (use for pedagogical purposes) on the skills and abilities that all families have, regardless of their economic, social and cultural status [21-23]. In this respect, funds of knowledge are understood as: “Culturally developed and historically accumulated bodies of knowledge, together with essential skills for the functioning and well-being of families and individuals” [24] (p. 47). Broadly, by contextualization, teaching in context or culturally congruent teaching is mean: “connecting teaching and curriculum to experiences and skills of students’ home and community” [25] (p. 11). In other words, educational contextualization refers to the integration of academic concepts, topics or competences with students’ personal, home, and community learning experiences [26].

The funds of knowledge approach is an inclusive perspective that seeks to combat the deficit perspective through positive recognition of students’ families. Deficit thinking in education arising from an unfounded perception that students of foreign origin, or from minorities, fail at school because of deficiencies in their families – such as a lack of cultural resources, inadequate home socialization, or limited intelligence – which obstruct the students’ learning process [27]. Contrary, the funds of knowledge approach maintains that families of foreign origin accumulate particular skills and intellectual expertise that make them unique and valuable. In that regard, it is implicitly assumed that all households possess resources, abilities and bodies of knowledge regardless of their ethnic, economic or linguistic background [21]. The challenge is to link these funds of knowledge creatively with the curriculum and school practice in order to improve learning [28]. This translates into forming a distinct practice community, a study group composed of different teachers and
university researchers [29], as well as ethnographic visits by teachers to the homes of some of their students in order to identify their funds of knowledge and establish ties of mutual trust between the school and the families. Once these skills and knowledge have been identified, they are linked to curricular content using educational innovations based on local knowledge and the previously identified skills of the families [22,30,31]. For example, a natural science teacher in a primary school used one father’s occupation in agriculture (i.e., breeding and taking care of animals on a farm) to develop learning objectives such as classifying animals according to what they eat: herbivores, carnivores, omnivores [32].

However, there are certain constraints and limitations to the funds of knowledge approach that can make it difficult to put into practice and reduce its efficacy. Three problems in particular have been identified [30,31,33]: (i) Implementing this approach requires time. Teachers cannot visit all of their students’ homes. In any given classroom, only a limited number of the students and their families can be focused on; (ii) There is lack of specific focus on the learner while so much attention is on the families and their knowledge and abilities. Within a single family, there are some discontinuities in the shared funds of knowledge, which means learners might not necessarily share some of the funds of knowledge gained by their parents or significant adults. Moreover, learners, as socially active agents, build and acquire their own funds of knowledge, distinct from those of their families, based on their own experiences, abilities and interests. As these funds build up, it becomes necessary to incorporate them into the equation together with the family funds of knowledge; (iii) Finally, there is a methodological limitation. In short, in order to identify students’ funds of knowledge, teachers carry out open interviews in the context of household visits. This means that only qualitative strategies and techniques are used [34].

In order to overcome these limitations, the concept of funds of identity has been [35–37]. This concept places the emphasis on students’ interests, practices and experiences through the incorporation of creative works made by the learners themselves—referred to as “identity artifacts” [38]—which then become educational resources to be used by teachers in class in order to personalize learning and connect learning experiences in and out of school [39,40]. In this sense, funds of identity are understood to comprise those people, spaces, things and activities which, for the learners, are the most important and most relevant, and which, ultimately, best define [41]. They may involve significant people, such as partners or family (‘social funds of identity’), spaces or places such as a city, a mountain or the sea (‘geographical funds of identity’), institutions such as the Catholic Church or the Muslim religion (‘institutional funds of identity’), interests and activities (‘identity practices’) or cultural artifacts such as a flag, a mobile phone or a musical instrument (‘cultural funds of identity’) [35].

While in the funds of knowledge approach the unit of analysis is family practices, the idea of funds of identity complements this by incorporating the identification of those resources (knowledge, interests, significant people, institutions, practices, places and spaces) perceived as significant by the learner-student [32]. Another key difference is that while funds of knowledge are identified by means of teachers making ethnographic visits to families and talking in depth about work experiences, routines and daily life, linguistic practices, and family literacy; funds of identity are generated by producing artifacts such as drawings, images and videos—tasks that can be used as a resources for establishing connections within curriculum and students’ lives [41].
Within this proposal, then, funds of identity—which are created and manifested through identity artifacts such as drawings, videos, collages, photographs or graphic representations—become the basis for the educational activity, although they do not represent academic learning processes in their own right. To this end, a connection must be sought and formed with the contents or competences involved in the learning subject: whether this be an author, a topic, a competence, a theory, an intervention program, or any aspect related to the theoretical-methodological-practical body of a particular subject or module.

Figure 1. Theoretical model for funds of identity 2.0.

Recently, it has been used avatars, digital representations of students, and identifying texts to represent-build students’ funds of identity and thereby promote learning processes in the context of second languages acquisition [42]. In that context, it has been suggested that the funds of identity represents a development of the funds of knowledge approach and heralds a new phase in the literature regarding this subject, which the author encapsulates under the labels “digital funds of identity” and “funds of knowledge 2.0” [42]. It is in this sense that we adopt the idea of funds of identity 2.0 to link it to the scenario of participatory culture described above (see Figure 1).

The general aim of this paper is to describe the design, implementation process and evaluation of an academic activity in higher education based on the theoretical approach described above. In particular, it describes the phases, characteristics and outcomes of the interactive learning project based on the funds of identity 2.0 approach within the context of participatory culture.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

60 university students ranging in age from 20 to 32 years (average age 21.46 years) took part in the study. They were enrolled in the subject Educational Psychology in the third grade of the degree in psychology in the academic year 2017-2018. More specifically, the activity was implemented from February 2018 to May 2018. Of the group, 92% were women (55 participants) and 8.3% were men (5 participants). The students voluntarily participated in the project. They signed an informed consent. Only in one case did a student not want to make public the video they had made in the YouTube channel; the other 59 shared their videos in the YouTube channel created to upload the final result of
the activity. For reasons of confidentiality, letters are used to identify the participants (for example, LPG).

2.2. Instruments

In order to identify/generate the students’ funds of identity (to answer the question “What are my funds of identity?”), we employed an adaptation of the self-portrait drawing technique developed by [43]. The instructions used were: “Depict—by means of a graph, a map, a drawing, a collage, a photograph, a text, or any other resource or medium—what is most significant or most important to you, what best defines you. It may be people, institutions, objects, activities, hobbies, knowledge, ideas, interests, spaces or places that are relevant to you.”

To create and share knowledge about a specific content, competence and topic related to the learning subject “Educational Psychology” students created and shared several videos. The instructions used were: “You will make a short video (about 2-5 minutes in length), where you summarize the most significant aspects of the work you have done, and then share it on the YouTube channel “UdG Psicologia - Educació”. This video may contain a Power Point presentation, an interview, fieldwork, a mixture of content (texts, photographs), etc. related to a particular author, subject, content, or competence connected to the subject (the author, subject, content, competence selected and linked previously with some of your funds of identity).”

2.3. Procedure

Five phases were implemented to connect students’ funds of identity and the subject Educational Psychology. Then, the model presented here (see Figure 1) is given practical expression in our proposal for an educational activity developed in five stages. The idea is to apply the notion of participatory culture using students’ productions, by linking their identities (interests, significant cultural artifacts, people, institutions, spaces or places, practices or activities) to the contents and competences of the subject or module. These contents may consist of theories or theoretical approaches (the theory of attachment or meaningful learning, for example), key topics (such as technological education or inclusive education), authors (Lev Vygotski or Jerome Bruner, for example). The competences refer to “describe and evaluate different perspectives on the issues or problems they address” or “identify diversity in cultural and social practices”, for example (see Table 1).

Table 1. Phases of the interactive learning project based on the funds of identity 2.0 approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Instruction</th>
<th>Period</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st phase: What are my funds of identity?</td>
<td>Depict—by means of a graph, map, drawing, collage, photograph, text, or any other resource or medium—what is most significant or most important to you, what best defines you. It may be people, institutions, objects, activities, hobbies, knowledge, ideas, interests, spaces or places that are relevant to you.</td>
<td>1 week</td>
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2nd phase: What content, topic and competence can I relate them to?

Link any of the elements depicted in the first task to a content, topic or competence included in the subject Educational Psychology. These may be topics, authors, competences or contents that are part of the syllabus.

To do this, you must familiarize yourself with the contents and competences included in the subject by consulting the guide or overview, as well as the reference manuals, articles or texts that are recommended within the framework of the subject.

1 month

3rd phase: What work or research am I going to do?

Now it is time to develop the chosen content or competence. That is, to look for information and construct knowledge regarding the understanding of “x” as content or the development of “x” as a competence.

To do this, you will have to do research work on the subject using reliable resources and funds: bibliography, interviews with experts, fieldwork, etc.

1 month

4th phase: How am I going to share it and with whom?

Next, you will make a short video (about 2-5 minutes in length), where you summarize the most significant aspects of the work you have done, and then share it on the YouTube channel “UdG Psicologia-Educació”.

This video might contain a PowerPoint presentation, an interview, fieldwork, a mixture of content (texts, photographs), etc. related to a particular author, subject, content, or competence connected to the subject (the author, subject, content, competence selected in stage 2).

1 month

5th phase: How do I evaluate it?

Finally, describe what you have learned from the project, what you should improve, and how, and then grade your task, from 0 to 2, in accordance with the length and breadth of your learning process, with 2 being the maximum level of acquired learning.

1 week

3. Results

We divide the results into three sections. First, the first phase is illustrated, consisting of the production of identity artifacts to identify students’ funds of identity. Second, the topics chosen by students from their identity funds are described (phases 2, 3 and 4). Finally, the learning acquired is described according to the students’ self-assessment (phase 5).

3.1. Phase 1. Identity artifacts and funds of identity

In relation to identity artifacts, the variety of resources and formats used stands out, despite the fact that a majority of the students either made a collage (a total of 23 students), or drawings (in 14 of the cases) (see Figures 2 and 3), together representing more than half of the students.
In the example of the collage shown in Figure 2, words and photographs appear that highlight the most significant elements for BPM. More specifically, these words are: Impulsive, thoughtful, animals (parrots) and music (BPM plays the flute and the guitar) as well as significant people and the activity depicted in the collage: “Finally, in the most privileged place, we find the love of animals, especially of the animals in the bird park where I work, which are a source of great enthusiasm and unconditional support in my daily life. Exotic animals are in fact my main passion.” (Explanation of the collage given by BPM).

LPG, in the explanation of her drawing (see Figure 3), describes herself as passionate about art: “As you can see, the self-portrait has a head full of colorful flowers and plants because I consider it essential to take care of our thoughts, as they ultimately determine our behavior and our lives. On the other hand, you can only see half of the face, because I think that people often see only a part of our personality, but there is another part that is more difficult to discover, even for oneself. You can
also see a large ear, representing the importance of listening well to people; active listening and empathy are important to become a good psychologist. Finally, the butterfly symbolizes freedom.”

Other means and resources used were significant or representative objects of the person (in 6 students), the making of a photographic album (also in 6 students), a text or writing (in 4 students), the making of a comic (in 2 students) and, finally, in five other cases other different identity artifacts: self-description through a word cloud, the making of an avatar, a poster, a song and, last a PowerPoint presentation. In the case of objects, it is worth mentioning that two students used a box in which they placed significant elements (see Figure 4 as an example).

![Figure 4. Example of object as identity artifact (student LPL).](image)

LPL includes, in what he calls “box of significant objects”, different photographs (her boyfriend, friends and family), a representation of his dog, as well as representations of his hobbies: cinema, music, traveling, and neurosciences symbolized by a brain (see Figure 4).

Regarding the funds of identity identified from the 60 identity artifacts, the importance of funds of social identity is emphasized, in addition to the reference to significant others including family, partner and friends as well as identity practices, hobbies and activities such as sports, music, social networks or video games (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Typology of funds of identity of participants

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of funds of identity</th>
<th>Number of times that appears in the 60 identity artifacts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographical funds of identity (cities, spaces, countries)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social funds of identity (family, couple, friends)</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural funds of identity (physical and symbolic artifacts)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Phases 2, 3 and 4. Linking of funds of identity with the subject

During phase 2, described in the procedure section, students connected some of their funds of identity with a topic or content from the subject Educational Psychology. The topics are diverse: family as a developmental context, neuroeducation, coeducation, sports and school performance, Fandom as a learning practice and context, the use of ICT for educational purposes, or intercultural education, among many others (see Figure 5). Basically, the connection either comes from a fund of social identity of participants, or from a significant identity practice, for example a job—either current or the one that the student would like to have in the future. This is the case of BPM (see Figure 2) who says: “As I have represented in my collage, exotic animals, in addition to my work, are my passion, with which I would like to focus on the intervention and reeducation of people with autism using educational activities with animals.” In the case of LPL (see Figure 4), the student himself says: “Inside the box, the brain is the most important object, and that is what I will link with the work. I hope my future is connected to neuropsychology. I would like to link education with neuroscience; I have read some articles about neuroeducation and I would like to develop this topic.”

Figure 5. Screenshot of the YouTube channel “UdG Psicologia – Educació” accessible via the link: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQzuUhsourEYQq29AGmlqqA/videos

In phase 3 the students did the fieldwork, either through interviews with experts, or by reviewing articles and books in the field of educational psychology, based on the previously identified interests. Subsequently, in phase 4, each student made a video with the objective of exposing and developing the topic. The videos were uploaded to the YouTube channel created for the project “UdG Psicologia - Educació” (see Figure 5).
3.3 Phase 5. Self-evaluation and learning obtained

Of the 60 grades proposed by the students themselves, in a self-assessment process, after the development of the activity, an average of 1.7 out of 2 is obtained, which is equivalent to a high average perceived performance of 8.4 out of 10 (B+).

Regarding the specific content of the learning that students say they have done, the mention of academic-type learning stands out, with 61 references. For example, “I have learned to take into account the different factors that influence children’s school performance” (APC); “I have learned various things about neuroscience, and in particular the basics of neuroeducation” (IA); “I have learned to distinguish between intercultural education and multicultural education” (SBM). However, they also highlight aspects related to technical procedures of production and distribution of content, with a total of 47 references to this effect. This is the case, for example, of BFN who says, “the realization of the video has allowed me to acquire technological skills related to the edition or use of animation programs”. In another example: “I had no idea that you could use programs to present information in an engaging way. In my case I used PowToon; it is a very good resource for preparing presentations” (ABT). Finally, we could highlight another category of learning, linked to attitudinal aspects, learning strategies and, even, linked to the conception of oneself as a learner, with 31 references. For example: “It has been an effort for me in terms of planning and capacity for synthesis, which can help me in other learning tasks and situations” (NBF). According to NCB: “I learned the importance of planning; I usually leave everything for the last minute, and when you make a video you have to first write a script, know what you want to explain, how you are going to divide the information, etc. I think I am now a more competent learner, I would say, at least as regards the management of time and the importance of planning.”

4. Discussion

The term participatory culture [11,12,17,19] appears as a field of knowledge not strictly linked to the study of how digital devices can improve learning processes, but rather to the analysis of new cultural forms of media convergence, production and participation, as well as forms of social organization and social change [4]. These subjects appear in informal spheres and can teach us how learning can be improved both inside and outside formal contexts, as well as in the transformation of society in general [14].

The application of these emerging cultures of creating and distributing knowledge means offering students opportunities to create and share academic and cultural products that will connect with their passions, interests, competences and prior knowledge—what can be referred to as students’ funds of identity [35–37, 44]. Through the creation of identity artifacts [38], the idea of funds of knowledge and identity allows us to give practical expression to the concept of participatory culture with pedagogical purposes.

It is within this framework that we implemented a project which contextualizes the contents and competences involved in university subjects via the creation and dissemination of videos based on the link between funds of identity and the learning subject. The proposed model can be used in any subject, as it is flexible with regard to subject matter. That is, it is a methodology that can be easily adapted to any field of university study, and even other contexts, because it is the students themselves who link their funds of identity with one of the topics, authors, or contents of the subject. However, it has the disadvantage that the chosen concept or topic is studied in depth, leaving other
aspects of the curriculum to be covered. It is therefore recommended to complement this methodology—closer to processes of personalization of learning in which the learner takes a leading role and responsibility in the processes of choosing and linking their interests and needs with the contents and curricular themes [45]—with others that enable us to expand the learning of content, competences and authors associated with a particular university subject.

It is necessary, however, to implement the concept of funds of identity 2.0 in order to determine both its potential and its disadvantages or limitations when it comes to generating learning processes. In this respect, future studies are required that document other experiences related to the methodology proposed here. Some of the issues are: What advantages are derived from the proposal presented here? What are its limitations? What improvements can be made? Does the proposed approach allow learning experiences to be connected inside and outside the formal contexts of teaching and learning? In short: How does the idea of funds of identity 2.0, and the associated methodology, contribute to teaching and learning processes in formal educational contexts? To resolve these issues, it is necessary to first design activities such as those proposed here and then evaluate their impact. The results obtained in this study allow us to suggest that learning is obtained on at least two levels: theoretical-academic and procedural, either in competency in the creation and presentation of content through digital media, or the development of learning strategies. However, the impact on student motivation and involvement, which we consider positive, as well as the potential long-term impact, has not been explored, for which longitudinal studies would be required to document, more a posteriori, the learning that students claim they have done; as well as the incorporation of other measures and sources to evaluate them, beyond the vision of the learners themselves, which is considered a limitation of the study presented here.

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