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Conceptualising Boys (and) Video Gaming: 'Communities of Practice'?

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The present investigation aimed to apply Wenger's (1998) conceptualisation of the 'communities of practice' concept (being one concept within the broader framework of social learning theory) to video gaming, based on Gee's (2003) suggestion that video gaming could be viewed as a 'community of practice'. In addition, Paechter's (2003a) recommendation that masculinities (after Connell, 1995, and inclusive of a Foucaultian notion of knowledge/power relations), could be additionally conceptualised as 'communities of masculinities practice' was explored in relation to video gaming. The choice of 'communities of practice' as the unifying concept for this study was favoured due to the application of the concept to a number of New Zealand, Ministry of Education initiatives. The research project aimed to evaluate the usefulness of the 'communities of practice' concept for application to boys (and) video gaming as a model for how the concept might be applied to a range of education-related social learning environments. A total of 284 Year 9 boys (13-14 years old), from five New Zealand schools were surveyed about their video gaming behaviours and understandings, and further 42 boys from a selection of these same schools took part in 'lessons' to discuss in detail aspects of their video gaming. Evidence supported that; video gaming in itself cannot be conceptualised as a 'community of practice' because there is no sense of *mutual engagement* in a *joint enterprise* in the playing of video games, (that was, there is no evidence to support the conceptual understanding of 'community' or 'practice'); and in addition, that while masculinities can be convincingly conceptualised as 'communities of practice', it is only when the activity of video gaming is seen as a resource within the *shared repertoire* of the 'communities of masculinities practice', in which masculinities, both hegemonic *and* less hegemonic are performed and reproduced, that video gaming can be linked with the 'communities of practice' concept. The implications of the findings are discussed in relation to where the conceptual and analytical lens offered by the 'communities of practice' concept, appear to be more applicable to the world of boys and video gaming. Also reiterated is that romanticised notions of 'community', applied to the likes of an educational environment but devoid of conceptual foundation, can be little more than rhetoric when not carefully considered and supported by empirical evidence.

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