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UNDERSTANDING INFORMAL ONLINE LEARNING AND IDENTITY THROUGH YOUNG ADULTS’ NARRATIVES

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This thesis attempts to get a closer look at informal online learning and identity through the narratives of young adults. The primary research question is this: how and what do young people – the so-called “digital natives” of 2016 – tell about their experiences with informal online learning and related identities? From a theoretical perspective, this work falls under the social constructivist paradigm in so far as it tries to understand and analyze highly individual, socially constructed knowledge. This paradigm is discussed in the thesis’s theory chapter, along with the two central topics of the thesis: informal online learning and identity. Four participants from the USA of roughly university age were interviewed for this project. Narrative data from the interviews was analyzed using a two-step approach. In the first step, the researcher reconstructs the participants’ key narratives in orientation to the research question. In the second step, thematic coding was used to isolate parts of the narratives that served to directly answer the research question. The fifth and sixth chapters present the findings of this analysis, i.e. the individual narratives of the research participants and thematic analytical discussion (thereby mirroring the two-step analytical method). The research found that the participants had conflicted views of themselves as “learners” when discussing their online identities. They nonetheless used informal online learning tools to access the things that mattered most to them, both in supplement to and outside of formal learning contexts. The participants also tended to value hands-on and independent learning, which they found more applicable to informal online learning than to offline formal learning. Further considerations are discussed in the seventh chapter, including trustworthiness and ethics in this research. Concluding remarks are offered in the final chapter, including suggestions for further research. In particular, further research needs to get at informal online learning’s relation to learning identity and critical media literacy. This thesis also highlights the need for qualitative research that takes the voices and experiences of students into account.

**Keywords**  identity, informal learning, learning, narrative, online learning
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1 INTRODUCTION

I began this project by thinking about some commonly held conceptions of interactions that take place online. The idea that increased social media use and daily online interactions are drastically changing the very nature of learning is a pervasive belief, particularly among educators (Greenhow, 2011; Kist, Srse, & Bishop, 2015). As a teacher, I struggled along with my coworkers to figure out exactly how smart phones should be integrated in the classroom, if at all. Some of my coworkers banned phones and tablets from their classrooms outright, seeing them as a nuisance for teachers and a distraction for students. For teachers, the internet and smart devices are a new challenge, and a daily one. They are aware that digital technology has changed how and where people learn, but are unsure of how to cope with the educational and social ramifications of learners’ digital exposure (Selwyn, 2009, p. 367). For example, I saw an essay by a university professor, Joelle Renstrom (2016), passed around recently among teachers. In it, she bemoans how internet-enabled devices had changed the social dynamics of her university classroom:

Students rarely even talk to each other anymore. Gone are the days when they gabbed about the impossible chemistry midterm they just took or the quality of the food at the dining halls. Around the 30-minute mark in class, their hands inch toward their backpacks or into their pockets, fingers feeling around for the buttons as though their mere shape offers comfort. When I end class, they whip out their phones with a collective sigh of relief, as though they’ve all just been allowed to go to the bathroom after having to hold it all day. (para. 2)

This isn’t just a problem for schools and teachers, either. Outside the classroom, lauded non-fiction media about technology and humans portray our continued foray into the digital realm as a detriment to the fabric of society and interpersonal relationships (see e.g. Franzen, 2013; Turkle, 2012; Turkle, 2015). The idea that technology is dumbing us down and tearing society apart is so pervasive that it has almost become cliché. We use the term “the real world” to describe our offline experiences, implicitly framing our online interactions as lesser, unreal events. We question whether any information we read online is reliable anymore, but continue sharing it nonetheless. Meanwhile, it is young people — the so-called “Millennial” generation — who bear the brunt of the blame for our collective descent into narcissistic laziness. A particularly notorious TIME cover story described Millennials, the
“Me Me Me Generation,” as “lazy, entitled, selfish, and shallow” people who “interact all
day entirely through a screen” and who behave “as rich kids have always behaved” (Stein,
2013, n. pag.).

At the policy level and within academia, discourse about the Millennial generation, technol-
ogy, and learning have centered around the concept of the “digital native.” The idea, coined
by US researcher Marc Prensky (2001), is that students born after 1980 have had drastically
more exposure to information technologies, whether through television, the internet, or video
games. This lifelong exposure, he argues, has created a new generation of “digital natives”
whose brains have “physically changed” and who therefore “think and process information
fundamentally differently than their predecessors” (p. 1). This rapid cognitive and social
change furthermore creates a divide between the digital native generation of today and the
“digital immigrant” generation of the past, who are (according to Prensky, anyway) ill-
equipped to deal with a new generation of technologically advanced and cognitively alien
young learners. Educational settings are seen as a site of this generational clash, in so far as
they provide (in theory) a struggle between old and new ways of learning (Bennett & Maton,
2010). This idea has captivated researchers in the fields of education, sociology, and cogni-
tive science and has had, as I see it, both positive and negative ramifications. On one hand,
the digital natives theory has drawn attention to the need for educators and academics alike
to better understand the ramifications of technology on teaching practices, learning theories,
and the like. On the other hand, research about digital natives – much like journalism about
young people and technology – tends to contain a sense of urgency, propagating the belief
that “advances in technology are creating societal changes which require new approaches
and practices” (Bennett & Maton, 2010, p. 321). It can therefore lead to reductive and perv-
asive stereotypes of both generations: one that is nearly lethargically entranced by technol-
ogy and the other that is hopelessly out of touch.

When I reflected on my own experiences online, however, I began to consider events that
were perhaps skipped in the reports of pop psychology and catchy magazine journalism. I
see moments of great significance happening online – of learning, of intercultural commu-
nication, of identities in formation. I see foreign language learners reaching out to virtual
friends across the world on Facebook. I see American high school students using Twitter to
educate each other on social and political issues that matter to them. I see trans and other
LGBT+ spectrum people using YouTube to proclaim their identities in a virtual community
that is often more supportive than their “real” one. In short, I see learning and growth happening online that contradicts the easy narrative of youths disengaging from reality to pursue their own vanity in a virtual world. Suffice it to say that I am skeptical about some of the more bombastic discourse surrounding Millennials and digital natives.

While I certainly find popular portrayals of young people and technology problematic, I did not want this research project to turn into a hyper-political screed that reacts to stereotypes with more stereotypes. We certainly need to reckon with the sociological, educational, and psychological effects of technology use, just as we need to question how we speak about the young people of 2016. However, the goal of this thesis was to take a step back from the fray and look closely at how people actually experience online environments. I want to lend a nuanced voice to the ongoing debate about technology and education by hearing about young people’s experiences online – the profound and the mundane, the narcissistic and the selfless. In short, this work attempts to get a closer look at learning and identity through the stories of young adults themselves.

In a preliminary literature review that I completed for this thesis, I found a great wealth of current research on informal online learning – one of the central topics of this thesis. Much of this research focused on clarifying what online learning is – where it happens, how it happens, and who partakes in it (see e.g. Sackey, Nguyen, & Grabill, 2015; Toffoli & Sock-ett, 2015; Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2014). Much of it also tried to understand the habits of online learners, often using questionnaires and quantitative data as a way to understand and track online learners’ perceptions and habits (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, & Meyer, 2010; Lee & Kim, 2014). What I was surprised not to find, by and large, were the voices of the learners themselves. Greenhow and Robelia (2009) concur that current research on informal online learning lacks “the actual voices and experiences of middle and high school age adolescents” (p. 120). Bennett and Maton (2010), too, argue that further research on digital natives needs to set aside the issue of generational differences and really get down the qualitative level in order to acquire “in-depth insights” into the practices of the current generation of young learners (p. 329). I have attempted to position my thesis within this gap. The aim of this research, then, is not only to learn more about informal online learning, but to do so in a narrative way that highlights the lived stories and experiences of the research participants. In particular, I wanted to get close to the context that I was familiar with in the United States and speak to students who were around the age of high school graduation.
Following these aims, the primary research question of the thesis is this: **What and how do young adults tell about their informal online learning experiences and related online identities?** Some themes and sub-questions emerge from this broad one. How do young people see themselves when they tell about their online experiences? If not as learners, then what? How do they relate informal online learning to offline formal learning? To their personal goals? What kinds of learning do students value? Essentially, I am interested in what young people tell about three things: informal online learning experiences, their online identities, and learning in general.

Although this thesis is written in and for an academic context, my hope is that it would be accessible outside of the academy. In particular, I aim to make the findings of this project useful for teachers, education administrators, and even parents. This project will likely not provide an easy answer to the question of how access to the internet affects our schooling and the fabric of our societies. It will furthermore not serve as a primer for how to integrate formal learning and Web 2.0 technology. What I hope it *will* provide is a glimpse into the experiences of those so-called digital natives who have grown up online. Although this project is, in part, my own construction, my aim is to create a space for readers to hear the voices of the participants. This research, then, could be seen as a start to a conversation between generations. If educators care about providing relevant, student-centered education, then I hope that this work provides an opportunity for them to know more deeply about the hopes, interests, anxieties, and experiences of some members of the current generation of learners.

In the second chapter, I will elaborate further on the theoretical frame of this research. In particular, I need to establish what exactly is meant by some of the ideas I have already mentioned: informal online learning, (online) identity, and digital environments. In this chapter, I will also preview how the social constructivist theoretical perspective of this research has informed and justified my methodological, interpretive, and representational choices. In the third chapter of this work, I will briefly establish the background of the researcher and the contexts of the research project. Then, in the fourth chapter there will be a discussion of narrative inquiry – what it is and why it was chosen for this project. I will also detail how the research interviews were planned and conducted in this chapter. The fifth chapter presents the findings of my research, i.e. the narratives of the research participants. This chapter is split into four parts, one part for each participant. Analytical discussion of the narratives will follow in the sixth chapter. Further considerations will be discussed in the
seventh chapter, including trustworthiness and ethics in this research. I will offer concluding remarks in the eighth and final chapter.
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will establish the theoretical frame of the thesis project. The purpose of the theoretical framework is to familiarize the reader with the concepts, terminology, and current literature that will be used in the thesis project (Corvellec, 2013). Most importantly, it presents the key theoretical assumptions that have informed the research questions, methodology, and analysis of the thesis (Corvellec, 2013). As I see it, theory is the “foundation” on which the “house” of the research can be built. I have divided this chapter into three sections. The first details the broad theoretical paradigm of social constructivism, which has informed both the topics, aims, and method(s) of the thesis. The second and third discuss informal online learning and identity, the two central theoretical ideas of this thesis.

2.1 Social Constructivism

I will begin by laying out the tenets of social constructivism, which is the broad theoretical paradigm this research falls under. Paradigms are useful in research because they provide a commonly-understood “bundle of assumptions” about ontology, epistemology, and the methods that should be used to answer the research questions (Macleod, 2009, p. 1). Social constructivism is useful here in that it is not bound to a single discipline, but is “rather a horizontal ‘meta science’ way of thinking that covers a variety of disciplines and interdisciplinary topics” (Riegler, 2012, p. 237) In this thesis, the social constructivist paradigm has informed how the topics of online learning and identity are discussed, which methodology was chosen, how the data analysis was carried out, and how the findings were presented. Given its importance to the whole of the thesis, it is a good place to start. Due to the varied research that exists under the guise of constructivism, I will first outline the theoretical constructs these different approaches have in common: namely, an emphasis on social facts, a skeptical approach to fixed identities, and a description of language as a tool for representing the world (Macleod, 2009; Onuf, 2002; Pouliot, 2004). After, I will elaborate on how this theoretical perspective is reflected in the research.

Constructivism first sees the world (i.e. reality) as constructed by social facts (Pouliot, 2004). These facts are collectively constructed ideas that become part of a social reality. In other words, they are “ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective” (Pouliot, 2004). Onuf (2002) puts it concisely: “Society is what it does.” A cogent example from education
is the idea of school spirit. School spirit is not an ontologically fixed idea, but because social agents agree to some extent that it exists – through school rallies, sporting events, and the collective wearing of school colors – it manifests in society as a seemingly-objective “fact.” This construction happens at the societal level and the individual level (Riegler, 2012). As Riegler (2002) explains, “the mind is organizationally closed, which implies that the mind must construct its reality and the entities it is populated with in the first place” (p. 239). I’ll use my previous example as an illustration. Just as “school spirit” is a concept constructed communally, its potency as a “social fact” depends on how individuals construct and experience the idea in their own minds. Pouliot (2004) is quick to point out that the task of the constructivist researcher is not to commit such acts of essentialization, but only to observe them (p. 329). Using Onuf and Pouliot’s descriptions, the job of constructivist research as I see it is to remain ambivalent about reality and to instead simply observe what the implications of our different perceptions and constructions of social facts are. Macleod (2009) puts it perfectly: “The goal of constructivist research is understanding and structuring, as opposed to prediction” (p. 1).

Secondly, constructivism portrays a normalized world that is constantly in transition (Palan, 2004). The constructivist world is normalized inasmuch as its facets are socially constructed and used as aforementioned “social facts.” Nonetheless, these facts are not fixed. They are in a constant state of renegotiation and reformation (Banerjee, 2015; Palan, 2004). The constructivist world is one “in which identities are in flux” (Palan, 2004, p. 21). This stands in contrast to positivist representations of reality in which the self is thought of as an empirically defined unit (Altheide, 2000). Constructivism instead contends that social encounters feature actors whose identities are completely contextual – that is, the nature of the actors are defined by a “complex interplay of personal, domestic and transnational forces” (Palan, 2004, p. 20). This lends actors agency in how they can alter the “rules” of social facts (Banerjee, 2015). This second tenet is key to my conception of identity in this research, which I will contend with in more detail in the third section of this chapter.

Finally, constructivism contends that language is a mechanism by which social norms are constructed. This may sound like – and is often confused with – a tenet of postmodernism, but constructivism differs in its description of language on two counts. Firstly, language to the constructivist is a tool for constructing the world, whereas language to the postmodernist
is a role for mimicking the world (Onuf, 2002, p. 7). To rephrase Onuf, I argue that post-modernism seeks to expose the fallacy of reality through linguistic play. Constructivism may acknowledge that reality is arbitrary, but it maintains a pragmatic view of language as a powerful, reality-shaping tool. Furthermore, constructivism is not limited to language as a way for constructing the world. “One should not look for the essence of constructivism in language alone,” Pouliot (2004) contends, but also in actions, behaviors, and opinions that agents perform on a daily basis (p. 327). In constructivism, it is these actions along with language that construct the ever-fluid social facts that comprise our world.

To put it concisely, the theoretical perspective of social constructivism includes an emphasis on social facts, a skeptical approach to fixed identities, and a description of language as a tool for representing the world. How has this perspective informed this research? To explain, let’s revisit the primary research question of this thesis: What and how do young adults tell about their online learning experiences? At the core of this question is a desire for the researcher to know more about the experience of learners, as well as how they understand and tell about these experiences. I am not interested, as a positivist researcher might be, in sweeping answers that apply to everyone, or in studying cases to predict future outcomes (Macleod, 2009). Rather, this thesis attempts to get down to the level of individual realities, to understand how each participant experiences and constructs their own realities. Inasmuch as social constructivist research is concerned with trying to get at these individual realities, qualitative methods – specifically narrative methods, in the context of this thesis – is the best way of getting there (Spector-Mersel, 2010). This epistemological and ontological perspective of narrative methodology will be explored in more detail in the fourth chapter. For now, I will move on discuss two more specific theoretical aspects of this thesis, keeping in mind that the way I will discuss them has been informed by the broader paradigm of social constructivism.

2.2 Informal Online Learning

Our current technology-dependent era has demanded that increased attention be paid to how technologies have shaped and will shape education (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). The increasingly intermingled virtual and physical worlds have affected almost all aspects of education, from how much information students retain in class to how well they communicate outside of it (Greenhow, 2011; Prensky, 2001). In fact, the sheer amount possible subjects
related to technology-assisted education can be overwhelming. Although many angles of
technology and education could be examined, for the purposes of clarity this section will
focus on only one: informal online learning. The purpose of this is to first describe how
informal online learning is defined / used in this thesis and secondly to highlight both com-
mon and uncommon themes in this field of research.

It’s important to theorize first what is meant by “informal” vs. “formal” learning and also
what constitutes “online” learning and virtual environments in general. Although informal
online learning is a growing and plentiful field of research, no one exact definition for the
phenomenon was used across the sources investigated for this thesis. Nonetheless, a general
theme emerged from each source and it became clear that although each author used a dif-
ferent working definition for informal online learning, they described it in similar ways by
contrasting it with formal learning. The authors also had a similar theoretical perspective by
considering online environments to be constructed social realities.

Speaking generally, informal learning is separate from or complementary to formal, brick-
and-mortar learning environments. In fact, many define informal education by stating what
it is not. Sackey, Nguyen and Grabill (2015) cite Falk and Dierking’s definition (2002),
which emphasizes learning that is unstructured and not classroom-based. Ziegler, Paulus and
Woodside (2014) similarly stress that informal learning is not dependent on an expert or
outside authority to set a learning agenda. The National Science Teachers Association in the
USA continues this theme, noting that informal learning does not use the formal curriculum,
objectives, or places that we would typically associate with schooling (as cited in Greenhow
& Robelia, 2009, p. 121). Toffoli and Sockett (2015), whose research focused specifically
on informal language learning, define it as learning that is not sought out deliberately, but
casually. Boekaerts and Minnaert (1999) echoed this casual nature of informal education,
describing it as “open-ended, non-threatening, enjoyable and explorative” (as cited in Tan,
2013, p. 464). For the purposes of this thesis, I will use a broad, synthesized definition of
informal education as any unstructured learning that takes place beyond the auspices of
formal learning environments. Formal learning is itself an unfixed definition, but for sim-
plicity in the context of this research we might think of it as any kind of institutionalized
school with set curricula and formal structure.
A definition of specifically informal online learning was a little bit more difficult to pin down, particularly because all the research surveyed here dealt with different spheres of virtual space, from well-known social networking sites like YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace, to more specific environments like a hiking discussion board and a microblogging platform designed specifically by the researchers themselves (Ebner et al., 2010; Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley, 2009; Tan, 2013; Ziegler et al., 2014). Nonetheless, much of the research of informal online learning begins with the assumption that virtual spaces, though existing in a non-physical form, are “no less socially or emotionally ‘real’” than physical spaces (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014). Although we do not experience online environments like YouTube in the same physical way that we would, say, a school building, these online environments are still “real” to those that use them because they have “real” social, emotional, and psychological impacts on their users (Delahunty et. al, 2014). This constructivist theoretical assumption runs through most of the research assessed here. These (informal) online spaces are also inherently complementary to (formal) physical space. As Fleckenstein (2005) put it, “Just as multiple windows enable user to inhabit multiple virtual sites simultaneously, virtual locations are always layered with multiple physical locations: computer setup, body, room, and building (as cited in Sackey et al., 2015, p. 114).” In other words, physical and virtual worlds cannot be completely separated. Although we conceptualize online learning as existing in an ephemeral constructed space, it does not exist completely separate from what we commonly conceive as physical space because its existence necessitates a physical monitor, machine, server, desk, etc.

For this chapter, I only focused on research involving online learning spaces that were not created or used for formal learning purposes. Although much research of online formal education (such as university distance learning courses) is conducted, all research surveyed here involved informal online learning spaces and therefore investigated virtual learning spaces that were primarily used for social networking or ostensibly non-school-related activities. Greenhow broadly defines social networking sites as services that are highly personalized and that connect users with personally relevant content (2011, p. 5). Social networking sites are indeed used in formal learning environments (as in an online discussion board constructed for the completion of a university course, for example), but those type of environments were not considered here because they are organized and constructed formally by educators.
So then, what is informal online learning? Using the previously consolidated definitions, we might define it as an **unstructured, non-directed learning activity or event that takes place in a virtual space or online social environment**. I have left this definition purposefully broad in order to avoid nit-picking later over what qualifies as informal online learning and what doesn’t. I’ll largely leave that up to the participants, since as I have mentioned, in this thesis it is their understandings and experiences that I am interested in. The term thus covers a range of activities, including (for example) reading an online news article on the bus, discovering a new travel destination on Instagram, seeking a community for your hobby on an online message board, or practicing a new language using YouTube videos. It covers online learning that is purposeful and self-directed (such as following recipe directions on Pinterest) as well as learning that is spontaneous (such as casually following a link you see on Twitter). This working definition will guide the remainder of this section as I highlight some common themes and questions explored in existing writing about informal online learning.

Much of the research about informal online learning involves an excavation of or a response to perceptions of the phenomenon. Researchers described perceptions of teachers, learners, and the popular media. Greenhow (2011) reacts strongly to a commonly believed idea that increased social media use and online interactions are dumbing down or distracting the youth of today. Her argument is that although this idea is popularly believed, educational research suggests the opposite: that increased digital media literacy might change society and education for the better (p. 5). Although less explicitly stated in other research, the results suggested in many articles seemed to offer an implicit argument that conventional wisdom about online interaction was misguided and that there was indeed some societal or educational benefit – albeit under-researched – to informal online learning practices (Ebner et al., 2010; Madge et al., 2009; Tan 2013; Toffoli & Sockett, 2015).

Some research in the area of online learning focus on learners’ perceptions of informal online education as a way of gauging the extent to which informal learners were self-aware of the nature of their online interactions. Tan’s (2013) article described a group of students taking an anthropology course, and how informal use of YouTube supplemented the learning that was conducted in the formal setting of the classroom. The students she interviewed had a positive perception of the use of videos to supplement their learning. One student summed up this sentiment succinctly:
There’s so much stuff online that you could learn anything that you wanted to learn outside of any academic institution – so it does make you think… It almost seems that if you were disciplined enough you could education [sic] yourself online with what’s available. (as cited in Tan, 2013, p. 474)

Furthermore, Tan’s subjects greatly valued the spontaneous online social interactions that took place outside of the formal learning environment (p. 473). The project of Ebner et al. (2010) focused on a microblogging tool that was introduced as a supplement to an Applied Sciences university in Austria. Their research suggested not only that students used the microblog as a way to ask questions, reflect, and share resources, but also that those students perceived their informal online interactions positively (p. 98). Madge et al. (2009) simply surveyed university students in the UK about their perceptions of Facebook as an extracurricular tool. Their respondents indicated that they not only used Facebook as a social tool, but also as a way to informally discuss their assignments and learning (p. 149). Interestingly, although those same students were using Facebook as an informal academic tool, they did not necessarily perceive it as a learning environment. This is expressed by a student quotation in the title of the article: “It is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work” (as cited in Madge et al., 2009, p. 141).

One article I examined for this section directly examined teachers’ perceptions of informal online learning. Toffoli and Sockett’s (2015) surveyed a French association of English university teachers for their reactions to a previous study surveying students’ informal online learning habits. Their findings were threefold. First, they found that although more than 97% of the surveyed students claimed to participate in informal online learning of English, the surveyed teachers perceived this number to be significantly lower (p. 11). Secondly, they found that teachers tended to express ambivalence about informal online learning of English, perhaps because it was not part of an “official” curriculum or because of the fear that what the students were learning online might not be correct (p. 16). Lastly, despite their initial misapprehensions and ambivalent attitudes, most teachers nonetheless thought that informal online learning had or would have a positive effect on their students’ English skills (p. 13).

It was interesting that much of the research examined here focused on or responded to perceptions of informal online learning. It suggests that although learning is indeed happening
informally online, learners and teachers alike may not necessarily know how much online interactions have affected their learning.

As highlighted in this section, existing research on informal online learning tends to establish a working definition of the phenomenon. Much of the research methodology focused simply on quantitative analysis of the extent to which students were engaging in informal learning online. Surveys were commonly used in this case, with both quantitative and qualitative analysis of their results (Ebner et al., 2010; Lee & Kim, 2014; Madge et al., 2009; Toffoli & Sackett, 2015). Other research was purely qualitative, using grounded theory (Delahunty et al., 2012) and discourse analysis (Sacky et al., 2015; Tan, 2013; Ziegler et al., 2014) to unpack habits and perceptions of informal online learning. To some extent, these methodologies seem appropriate for a new phenomenon such as this one. Before exploring a phenomenon deeply, it’s important to get a broad, clear picture of what it is and to what extent it even exists. It was also refreshing to hear in some of the literature from learners themselves how they viewed their own learning habits and identities in informal online spaces.

However, most of this “hearing” was simply done through surveys and discourse analysis, which only scratched the surface of how online learners experienced this informal education. Any subject-driven sense of narrative or emancipation was largely absent in the research surveyed here. Only one article I found commented on this: “Missing from [past research on learning in social networks] are the actual voices and experiences of middle and high school age adolescents” (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009, p. 120). The paradox here is that although researchers were interested in the educational environments that learners were creating online, few seem interested in letting those learners describe the phenomenon themselves. Thus, narrative research seems well-suited to further investigation of this topic, and to a great extent is why I have chosen it for this thesis. It might be used as a starting point for ascertaining a clearer picture of if and how informal online learning actually happens. It was also surprising to not encounter any use of digital ethnography in the surveyed research. Ethnography might be another good starting point for further research, as it could give both participants and researcher(s) a more active role in experiencing and describing the worlds they create and inhabit. After all, if we truly believe that informal online educational landscapes and identities are shaped by the learners, then we ought to give those learners a more
active role in shaping the research itself. To me, the voices and experiences of online learners ought to be the starting point for continued research in the swiftly growing, constantly evolving field of informal online learning.

2.3 (Online) Identity

Five of the articles I examined for the previous section not only discussed informal online learning as an educational phenomenon, but also as inexorably linked with identity formation (Delahunty, 2012; Delahunty et al., 2014; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Lee & Kim, 2014; Madge et al., 2009). It’s not difficult to see why the topic of identity lends itself logically to the discussion of online interactions and online learning specifically. Identity formation online – much like in the “real” world – is both personally constructed (in the way one, for example, construct his or her profile on Facebook) and a socially negotiated (as in the way one negotiates the amount of public information he or she is willing to share with others on social media) (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). Delahunty et al. (2014) suggest that informal knowledge-building happens online because students’ identity construction is inherently involved in the process of online interaction, particularly on social networks. Their literature review hoped to stimulate further research by suggesting that online identity formation and online learning are inseparably linked. Greenhow & Robelia’s research (2009) similarly claimed that as students developed their conceptual competence of online resources and scapes, they were also building a sense of confidence and self-awareness. Delahunty’s (2012) personal research demonstrated that an online discussion board for new teachers of English not only helped the students learn more about the material of the teacher training course, but also aided them in constructing their emergent identities as teachers (p. 416). The link between learning and identity has been well-established in current research, but I want to take a step back in this section to discuss how the term “identity” is being used in this thesis, and more specifically how virtual (i.e. online) environments factor into discussions of identity.

Identity is a complex topic, but we might simply define it as the part(s), roles, or aspects of oneself that are known to others (Altheide, 2000). We have different roles in different social contexts, such as parent, student, friend, citizen, neighbor, etc. Identity is therefore both a social and a private process. We see or want to see ourselves in certain ways (privately), we perform or announce our identities in a variety of ways (socially), and our claimed identities
may then be “endorsed” by those we perform them to (Suler, 2002; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). For example, someone may privately see themselves as a fan of a sports team, but this “fan” identity means very little without the socially mediated context(s) in which that identity is performed and endorsed – such as sporting events, fan gatherings, pregame parties and the like. (Offline) identity is furthermore constructed under corporeal constraints. That is, one’s body limits them (to some extent) from performing identities that are visibly inconsistent with the identities they claim (Zhao et al., 2008). Online, however, the issue becomes more complicated. In virtual environments, identities can become untethered from one’s body, allowing users to perform identities that may not be possible in real life (Schultze, 2014). Zhao et al. (2008) elaborate:

> As the corporeal body is detached from social encounters in the online environment, it becomes possible for individuals to interact with one another on the Internet in fully disembodied text mode that reveals nothing about their physical characteristics. […] The combination of disembodiment and anonymity creates a technologically mediated environment in which a new mode of identity production emerges. (p. 1817)

An extreme example of this “new mode” would be an online role-playing game like Second Life, in which a user’s character is almost entirely self-created and can look / act completely differently from how the user would in real life. You might interact all day with your middle-aged coworker, never knowing that in an online game he was a young, lithe, female elf. This disembodied anonymity can allow for a healthy expression of non-conventional identities or latent, “hidden selves,” particularly for those who are unable to perform those identities in their offline lives (Suler, 2002). On the other hand, we hold a great deal of societal anxiety about the disembodied anonymity allowed for in virtual environments, as evidenced by films like “Catfish” or TV shows like “To Catch a Predator.” We worry about the authenticity and trustworthiness of those on the other side of the screen, even as we are beguiled by the privacy and identity curation offered online (Suler, 2002).

Recently, however, the concept of “disembodied” identity in online environments has been called into question, particularly as it relates to social media (i.e. sites like Facebook and Twitter). It wouldn’t be quite accurate to say that our identities are completely untethered from our bodies online, particularly in online spaces that call for visual representations of the embodied self (Schultze, 2014). Take Facebook, for example. On Facebook, it’s likely
that most users don’t interact anonymously with strangers. On the contrary, the site encourages users to upload genuine personal information – name, location, profession, current profile picture – and to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances from their offline lives. Zhao et al. (2008) call this offline-based online interaction an “anchored relationship” (p. 1818). The relationships may partially take shape online, but they are “anchored” in pre-existing offline social networks. In these “anchored” online relationships, the disembodying potential of identity is greatly reduced, which “places constraints on the freedom of identity claims” (p. 1818). In other words, it would be hard to fool most of your Facebook friends with a profile picture of somebody else because those same friends have likely seen what you look like face-to-face.

Nonetheless, even nonymous (i.e. anchored relationship-based) online environments like Facebook contain some degree of disembodied control over one’s identity that isn’t available in the offline world (Blanco Ramírez & Palu-ay, 2015). The crux of this control – what I’ll refer to as identity curation – comes in the form of profile photos, short biographies, favorite quotations, and other public posts. Posting a photo of a fancy restaurant meal on Instagram, for instance, says something rather different about a person than would a picture of that same person eating fast food. Thus, by granting users control over what they post publicly, social networking sites offer users the ability to curate a particular online persona. These everyday online identity construction processes bear a remarkable resemblance to corporate branding and audience management strategies on a smaller scale, in that they allow individuals a great deal of control over how their identity is received and understood by others (Blanco Ramírez & Palu-ay, 2015; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This curation, Zhao et al. (2008) suggest, can empower individuals “to actualize the identities they hope to establish but are unable to in face-to-face situations” (p. 1819). The online self in most contexts, then, is not quite embodied and not quite disembodied. Rather, it represents a “cyborg” identity that is anchored in the body but projects and performs a hoped-for self into cyberspace (Schultze, 2014, para. 12). To complicate things further, online identity is not one fixed unit (Schultze, 2014). Different online environments offer different levels of anonymity and also contain different audiences, therefore allowing for the curation of many different identities across sites (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

To conclude, the concept of identity construction as I will use it in this thesis is a personal and social process of self-conception (Suler, 2002). Online, the embodied and disembodied
self is entangled, allowing for the construction of hoped-for identities across different sites and platforms (Schultze, 2014). Identity construction’s link with learning is important for this research not only because the two processes are often intertwined but also because one’s experiences of online identity construction may offer insight into if and how learning happens in online environments (Delahunty, 2014). To reiterate, given that social constructivism has informed the methodology and analysis of this research, the emphasis here is on experience. The aim of this thesis is not to prescribe ideas for the participants, but rather to hear how they have experienced the phenomena of informal online learning and identity construction. This theory provides a framework for understanding their experiences, as well as a justification for how I have investigated, analyzed, and represented their experiences (Corvellec, 2013). In the following chapter I will briefly establish the background and context(s) of this research before moving on to explain my methodological choices.
3 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The (non-virtual) context of this research is the United States, since this is where both the participants and the researcher have grown up. More specifically, I want to establish this research in the context of Hamilton County, Indiana, since both researcher and participants have lived and attended public school in Hamilton County. Although much of the research interviews concerned matters that transcend the geographical setting, a shared understanding of the local context ran beneath the interviews. This thesis is not explicitly concerned with formal public schooling policy or the geopolitical status of Hamilton County, but both of these topics were a common (and often implicit) point of reference during the research interviews and a bit of contextual understanding will help better frame the narratives and findings presented in this thesis.

Indiana is a state located in the Great Lakes / Midwestern region of the United States. It has a diverse economy, with industry largely generated from the manufacturing and agricultural sectors (StatsIndiana, 2016). Hamilton County is a suburban and rural area of some 300,000 people located in the northern outskirts of Indiana’s capital city, Indianapolis. Hamilton County enjoys a relatively low unemployment rate (3%), a relatively low poverty rate (4.9%), a high standard of living, and – out of more than 3100 counties in the USA – remains in the top 30 in terms of median household income (StatsAmerica, 2016; United States Census Bureau, 2016). Demographically, Hamilton County lacks diversity relative to the state and country at large. Nearly 90% of Hamilton County residents are white, and – out of those who claimed religious affiliation – less than 5% were of a non-Christian faith (The Association of Religion Data Archives, 2010; United States Census Bureau, 2016). Politically, Hamilton County is one of the most conservative regions in the state, having consistently given a majority of votes to the Republican (socially and fiscally conservative) candidate in every presidential election since 1916 (Leip, 2012).

In a broader sense, this work must also be situated within the context of American internet connectivity if we are to understand how the participants and their peers experience social media and informal online learning. The exhaustive statistical work conducted by Pew Research Center sheds light on technology habits and opinions of American people and has been an invaluable resource as I have tried to better understand the context of technology.
use in the United States and in Hamilton County, Indiana. A few figures of particular con-
textual import to this thesis:

- As of 2015, over 96% of American young people aged 18-29 had daily access to the internet (Perrin & Duggin, 2015).
- Young people in higher-income households are more likely to use the internet in the United States (Perrin & Duggin, 2015).
- 57% of American teenagers report having friends online that they had never met (Lenhart, 2015).
- As of 2015, over 85% of American young people aged 18-29 owned a smart phone with internet access (Anderson, 2015).
- As of 2016, all secondary school students in Hamilton County had access to an internet-enabled iPad during school hours. Most have access to their device outside of school hours as well (Kennedy, 2016; Thackston, 2015).

These statistics again call to mind Presnky’s (2001) descriptions of “digital natives,” a generation of young people who have grown up using digital technologies. In short, young Americans have unprecedented access to smart mobile devices, social networking sites, internet resources, and digital technology in and outside the classroom, particularly in economically advantaged areas like Hamilton County.

To reiterate: these usage statistics and demographic data do not necessarily reflect the habits, opinions, or personal details of participants in this research. They do, however, represent the larger milieu in which the participants (and the researcher) have lived some or all of their lives. They are therefore an inseparable part of the research context, especially given how they were alluded to during the research interviews.

Before proceeding further, it is also important to briefly establish the researcher’s position and experiences in regards to the research topics, as this may inform how readers understand the thesis and how I myself have interpreted the data (Roulston, 2010; Webb, 1997, p. 200). In narrative research (and in much qualitative research in general), researchers must be forthright with their own perspectives and roles as interpreters, inasmuch as “stories don’t just fall from the sky” (Riessman, 2008, p. 8). To borrow from Popper, observation in research is not a passive experience, but an active process preceded by the personal and the theoretical (as cited in Webb, 1997, p. 200). The position of the researcher in narrative inquiry will be
discussed further in the seventh chapter, but for now suffice it to briefly mention my own position in relation to the research topics and project.

I graduated from high school in Hamilton County in 2007, before iPads were a daily part of every student’s life there, or indeed before iPads even existed. I did not have a personal computer or internet-enabled device of my own growing up, but access to the internet and computers for educational (and sometimes personal) use was often available to me both at home and at school from an early age. I would therefore probably consider myself a “digital native,” in so far as computers and the internet have basically always been a part of my life. When I did get a laptop of my own after high school graduation, it was at a time that online social networking was starting to become ubiquitous among my peers. The next few years were ones of immense personal growth for me, not only because I had left home and started university studies in a different part of the state, but also because of the things I was discovering online. The internet became both a tool for supplementing my formal studies and a way for me to learn about things I’d always been interested in. During a summer back at home in 2009, I became involved with the video blogging community on YouTube. Making and watching videos was a way for me to make friends with and learn from others around the world. It also became an escape from what I had felt was a stifling and homogenous atmosphere in Hamilton County. Although I have since fallen out of the video blogging habit, I have maintained many of the friendships I first made on YouTube, and in the years since, I have picked up many other virtual friendships from places like Twitter and Instagram. These friendships persist as I have moved around the world, and I have been lucky to meet many of the people I had previously only seen through a screen. My social media and informal online learning habits have also persisted, and they have actually led to many of the significant events in my life, including moving to Korea and studying in Finland. I continue discover more online about things that are important to me, whether it’s something as banal as a new vegetarian recipe or as personal as my own family history. The value that I give to these experiences has certainly informed both my choice in thesis topic and also the way I approach the topic.

Just as Riessman (2008) maintains, my experiences are as much a part of the research context as the geographical information is. I have indeed taken precautions to conduct ethical and trustworthy qualitative research (see chapter 7). Nonetheless, because of the nature of narrative research – in which the researcher is both observer and participant – I want to be clear
about the ways in which my personal experiences may, in a way, be participating in the research process (Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015, p. 12). Now that I have established the general background and theoretical frame of this research, I will discuss in more detail the methodological practices, data collection, and analysis of this thesis.
4 METHODOLOGY – NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Now that the theoretical foundation of this work has been laid, I will move on to discuss the methodological choices of this project. First, I will give an account of the historical and disciplinary purposes of narrative research. Next, I will discuss the ontological and epistemological perspectives of narrative research. In this section, I will also describe how the social constructivist theoretical perspective of the thesis relates to the ontological and epistemological perspective of narrative inquiry. Finally, I will describe how narrative inquiry was carried out in this thesis in particular, including the planning, interviewing, representation, and data analysis.

4.1 The Narrative Turn

If you’ve had a conversation with someone today, it’s likely that you’ve both told and heard a story or two. Stories are one of the ways we understand and reproduce meanings about ourselves, each other, and our world(s). The stories we exchange in daily conversation are also a way for us to externalize our own experiences, emotions, and perceptions. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) put it, we are “storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). Narrative research sees these stories as fruitful sites for understanding lived experience. In narrative inquiry, researchers gather, interpret, tell, and retell stories. These stories are the data in narrative research (Riessman, 2008). Before going deeper into this epistemological perspective, I will briefly attend to a historical account of narrative as a research discipline.

Narrative research can be traced back as far as the late 1800s, but many consider the Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s to be one of the key beginnings of narrative research in the social sciences (Spector-Mersel, 2010). The Chicago School used a combination of ethnographic and narrative methods to examine the experiences of different urban American groups (Riessman, 2008). Both Riessman (2008) and Spector-Mersel (2010) are quick to point out, however, that narrative research in the early 20th century was still largely positivistic in nature; that is, it was assumed to represent a social reality and was mainly confined to the field of sociology. The so-called “narrative turn” that emerged after the 1960s firstly marked a broadening of the domain of narrative research. No longer was it confined to
sociology, but it began to be widely used in psychology, sociolinguistics, folklore, anthropology, and more—what Riessman calls a “veritable garden of cross-disciplinary hybrids” (2008, p. 14). The narrative turn secondly marked a shift away from an interest in realism and positivism as a result of “disappointment with the inability of quantitative methods to appreciate human experience” (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Thus, most narrative research today (including the research in this thesis) does not consider narrative to be a complete representation of reality, but rather an individual interpretation of a constructed reality (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). According to most current perspectives, then, narrative research is not so much a mirror of reality as it is one person’s (or many people’s) subjective snapshot of how they perceive the world.

Because of this emphasis on individual subjectivity, narrative research is frequently used as a cross-disciplinary method of emancipation and identity exploration. Feminist and other liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s served to further interest in narrative research as a way of investigating and awakening “silenced voices” (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 207). McAdams’ foundational work in the 1980s more stressed narrative as a general tool for exploring individual identity (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Shuman similarly categorizes narrative as a “means of transforming oppressive conditions” by creating opportunities for emancipation and liberation (2005, p. 5). Narrative research is inherently concerned with identity because by telling stories, the teller constructs not only the world but her own self as she sees it. Yuval-Davis puts it succinctly: “Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)” (as cited in Riessman, 2008, p. 8). If narrative research involves analysis of a narrative text, then, narrative research itself becomes a story about a story. By analyzing and re-constructing narratives, narrative researchers must positions themselves as co-constructers of social reality and as a key component to the potential success of the emancipation (see more on the researcher’s position in the seventh chapter). Narrative research may not have a single form or definition, but based on its history and current position in the social sciences, its purposes seem to be mainly driven by liberation, identity construction, political argument, and social change. In fact, narrative research’s rich historical concern with identity is the first of many reasons it was selected for this thesis.
So, what does the analytic process of narrative research look like in practice? This largely depends on who is conducting the research. In a survey of literature for this project, I encountered no less than 15 ways of doing the actual narrative analysis. Lieblich et al. (1998) and Fina and Georgakopoulou (2015) provide a variety of methodological approaches in their books about narrative research, but these would be impossible to summarize here. Spector-Mersel (2010) acknowledges this disparity in narrative methodologies, but tries to narrow down the practice to two basic characteristics: first, that a story is treated as the object of investigation and second, that the research is done holistically, with equal regard to form, content, context, and multidimensionality (p. 214). Attempting to summarize how narrative data is gathered and analyzed is, again, a daunting task given the wide spectrum of disciplines in which narrative research is conducted. Later in this chapter, I will describe how I personally have chosen to carry it out in this project. Instead of the how of narrative research, though, for now I want to focus on the why. What ontological and epistemological perspectives drive narrative research today? What are the theoretical foundations of narrative research’s historic tendency toward identity formation and emancipation?

### 4.2 Ontology and Epistemology in Narrative Research

Due to its emphasis on the individual perceptions and constructions of reality, narrative research as it is practiced nowadays draws on elements from social constructivism and post-structuralism as the basis of its ontology (Spector-Mersel, 2010). In brief, reality to the narrative researcher is individually and socially constructed. Particular to narrative research, however, is the contention that social reality is narrative in its very nature. In other words, the process of constructing social reality and constructing narratives are inexorably intertwined. By constructing stories, we construct reality (and vice-versa). Narrative research furthermore views social reality as fluid and constantly changing. The story we tell about ourselves today may not be the story we tell tomorrow. Lieblich et al. (1998) liken a narrative text to a still photograph that is only a brief representation of a constantly changing reality. They elaborate: “The particular life story is one (or more) instance of the polyphonic versions of the possible constructions or presentations of people’s selves and lives, which they use according to specific momentary influences” (p. 8). From an ontological standpoint, the narrative researcher must therefore acknowledge not only that the story they are dealing with is individually subjective, but also that that story represents a temporally subjective construction of reality.
In regards to epistemology, narrative research again shares a theoretical foundation with constructivism. In narrative research, knowledge is produced individually and socially by way of “interpretative processes that are subjective and culturally rooted” (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 212). Shlasky and Alpert see the border between ontology and epistemology in narrative research as fundamentally blurry (as cited in Spector-Mersel, 2010). I suggest that it is a cyclical relationship: reality and the way we interpret it are in a constant process of shaping each other. In narrative research, the epistemological work is done, obviously, through stories. Narrative is a way of understanding a present reality, or to again borrow Lieblich’s metaphor, a way of photographing the present moment as it is seen by the narrator (1998). The idea that telling stories is a fundamental way of interpreting and producing knowledge returns again and again throughout the literature considered for this project. Although narratives and narrative analysis takes many shapes across many disciplines, the point is not the form, but the process. By telling a story (or a story about a story, in the researcher’s case), we interpret and produce knowledge about our constructed world.

To conclude: most forms of narrative inquiry in the social sciences share the ontological and epistemological perspective of how narrative contributes to socially constructed reality (or realities). As I have established in this section and in the second chapter, this thesis project shares that theoretical perspective. As I have also mentioned, however, narrative research in practice takes many forms. Thus, I will devote the following section to explaining how a narrative methodology was enacted in this research.

4.3 Methodological Practice of the Thesis Project

This section will describe how narrative research was carried out specifically in the context of this project. First, I will clarify the definition of “narrative research” as it is used in this thesis. Then, there will be a brief description of how and why participants were selected for this project. I will also explain how I theorized and structured the interviews to elicit the narrative data. Finally, I will preview the results of the research by detailing how I have analyzed and represented the data in this thesis.

It’s important to pause first to define narrative research as it used here. Narrative research today tends to fall either into the category of “narrative inquiry” or “narrative analysis”
(Vasquez, 2011). I find Vasquez’s (2011) distinction between these two categories helpful in describing the methodological practice of this thesis. As she explains:

Narrative inquiry scholars usually focus more on what the content of the narrative reveals about the self, whereas narrative analysts examine more closely the features of the discourse to identify facets of the self [emphasis added].

By that definition, then, this thesis falls under the category of narrative inquiry. The research aims of this project point me towards examining what the narration tells us about the participants’ experiences, rather than how their narration situates their identities within the discursive context of the research interview. In other words, it’s a matter of focusing on the “meat” of the narratives rather than on the discursive process of narration itself.

Now on to the practical details of narrative inquiry in this thesis. I selected participants for this research from Hamilton County, Indiana, USA. As I have already established in the third chapter, this context was familiar to both myself and the participants. At first I had considered collecting narratives from a different country, but decided that sticking to a familiar setting would help me better understand the participants (and they me). This shared familiarity helped quickly establish rapport and context during the interviews, and added to the textual richness of the data. Furthermore, I wanted to select young adults who had finished or were close to finishing their compulsory secondary schooling. This, I thought, would give them a retrospective, mature point of view that some of their younger classmates might not have had.

Based on these criteria, four participants were selected for this project. They received a brief description of the research aims ahead of time and all four graciously agreed to an interview. Participants received and signed an informed consent form that explained their rights as participants, as well as their roles in the research process (see Chapter 7 and Appendix 1). Of the four participants, two are women and two men. Two have finished secondary school and two have not. Each participant had spent all or most of their formative years in Hamilton County, Indiana. It’s worth mentioning that although the sample size of this project may seem quite small to someone more familiar with quantitative research, in narrative research four participants is quite substantial, given both the detail involved in narrative inquiry and given the relative scope of a Master’s thesis (Seidman, 1991, p. 45). It’s also important to note that, although they are not close personal friends or relatives, I was acquainted with all of the participants before the time of the research. In other words, purposive sampling was
used, rather than random sampling (Lee-Jen, Hui-Man Huang, & Hao-Hsien Lee, 2012). This was partly a matter of convenience, as the pool of potential participants who fit the criteria for this project is quite large. However, I do believe this passing familiarity also served to improve the ease with which we were able to discuss some deep, sometimes personal topics. Narrative participants may be less likely to speak frankly to a researcher they have just met (Seidman, 1991).

Although narrative data can be elicited in many different ways – through art, through personal written accounts – I have stuck with the traditional qualitative practice of the research interview. However, theorizing the research interview beforehand proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of the research process. The first problem was that I needed the interviews to elicit narrative data. I also wanted to ensure that the data elicited by the interviews served to directly answer the primary research question: What and how do young adults tell about their online learning experiences and identities? In preparing for this stage, Seidman’s (1991) Interviewing as Qualitative Research and Roulston’s (2010) Reflective Interviewing were used as primary resources for theorizing and preparing the interviews. Their manuals cover many of the practical issues I have already mentioned (finding participants, preparing consent forms) as well as some of the more theoretical issues (theorizing the critically reflective interviewer, crafting interview questions, and analyzing and representing interview data).

In preparing interview questions, particular attention was paid to writing questions that served to directly answer the research question of the thesis (Roulston, 2010). These questions were furthermore phrased in such a way as to elicit actual narratives from them – rather than, say, short comments or opinions. Although many narrative studies traditionally seek to elicit grand, lifelong narratives, due to the phenomenological focus of this study, the questions were formed in such a way as to elicit so-called “small stories” – the passing stories of our day to day lives (Bamberg, 2004, p. 367). I focused on these small stories due to the multitude of topics this project seeks to investigate. Thus, the interview questions were structured around the two foci of this project: identity and online learning (a full list of questions used in the research interview can be seen in Appendix 2). Due to the small stories focus and the multiple questions, interviews were semi-structured, using Roulston’s (2010) description as a guide:
In these kinds of interviews, interviewers refer to a prepared interview guide that includes a number of questions. […] Although the interview guide provides the same starting point for each semi-structured interview given that it assumes a common set of discussable topics – each interview will vary according to what was said by individual interviewees, and how each interviewer used follow up questions to elicit further description. (p. 15)

Although the interviews were informed by the topics of the thesis, each proceeded in different ways based on the spontaneous interactions between interviewer and interviewee. The semi-structured interview format also served to elicit unique, highly personal “small-story” narratives.

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed them and turned to analyzing the data. The analysis of this narrative data consisted of two stages, roughly adapting Polkinghorne’s (1995) dual approaches to narrative data. In the first stage, I read the interview material several times until narrative patterns emerged (Lieblich et al., 1998). Next, I tried to isolate the participants’ core narratives and write them out as a traditional narrative or story. “Core narratives” here refers to narratives in the data that referred specifically to the foci of the research questions. Inasmuch as narratives are co-constructs of the researcher and participant, this first stage of the analysis uses “narrative reasoning” to shape the data in orientation to the research questions (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008). I did not just haphazardly rewrite what had been said in the interviews, but rather highlighted the aspects of the small story narratives that would serve to answer the research questions regarding learning, online activity, and identity. Of course the participants provided many stories and thoughts, but if they were largely irrelevant to the research questions, they were left out of the reconstructed stories. This first stage may not appear traditionally analytical, but it is in fact a key component in the analysis of narrative data (Riessman, 2008). It was a way of taking all of the chaos of the interview data and distilling it down to the participants’ relevant narratives. This first stage was done for each participant separately. Once the first stage of analysis was complete, I was left with four mini-biographies of each participant that included my summaries of their stories and their relevant direct quotations.

In the second stage of the analysis, I used thematic coding to isolate the narratives that served to more directly answer the research question (Polkinghorne, 1995). I marked cases in the
narrative data that directly corresponded to the primary research question and its sub questions. In a rather old-fashioned way, I used colored markers to code the different themes in the stories. Again, these themes represented the foci of the research questions: online identity, learning identity, learning in general, and informal online learning specifically. I have tried to heed Lieblich et al.’s advice in order to take into account the complexity and contextual nature of these themes:

Follow each theme throughout the story and note your conclusions. Be aware of where a theme appears for the first and last times, the transitions between themes, the context for each one, and their relative salience in the text. Again, pay special attention to episodes [i.e. small story narratives] that seem to contradict the theme in terms of content, mood, or evaluation by the teller (p. 32).

At the end of the second stage, I thus was left with color-coded “answers” to the research questions in the form of narrative content themes. This second stage took into account all the narratives collectively to see what kind of answers were emerging from the data as a whole (rather than individually, as in the first stage).

For clarity, I have presented the findings in the following chapter in a way that mirrors how the analysis was done. The fifth chapter (5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4) represent the first stage of the analysis. In this chapter, I present the individual narratives of each participant. To reiterate: this is not just presentation of raw interview data, but rather a way of re-orienting the narrative data in a way that is coherent and relevant to the research questions. I have given each participant their own subsection for two reasons. First, it highlights the ways in which each person had different lived experiences, despite their shared geopolitical and educational contexts. It wouldn’t have been appropriate to lump their narratives together indiscriminately, especially given narrative inquiry’s highly personal, contextual focus (Watson, 2007). Secondly, one of the aims of this thesis was to utilize the emancipatory potential of narrative research to open a space to hear from “the actual voices and experiences” of young learners (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009, p. 120; Spector-Mersel, 2010). Giving each participant their own narrative space represents my attempt to highlight what their individual stories have to offer in this research. The following chapter (6.1, 6.2, 6.3) attends to a broad analysis of the narrative data. Per Polkinghorne’s (1995) approach, thematic analysis was used across the data to draw out the key findings of the research. In this section, I will show how the narratives serve to directly answer the research questions posed at the beginning of this thesis. This chapter is not organized by individual participant, but rather grapples with the data as
a whole, in order to get a decisive, “big picture” look at the research. It is furthermore orga-
nized by theme, in an attempt to demonstrate how the findings are directly answering the
research questions.
5 FINDINGS - PARTICIPANTS’ NARRATIVES

The following four sections represent the first part of the findings of the thesis: the (re)presentation of each participant’s narratives. As I have previously established, the purpose of these sections is to use (re)construct the narratives in relation to the research question(s) of this thesis. Per ethical procedure, names and other identifying information have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants.

5.1 Anthony

The first research participant – who I’ll refer to as Anthony – is the youngest among the students I interviewed, but has plans for his life that stretch well into his 20s. Anthony is still completing his penultimate year of high school but is already aiming to complete his PhD in genetics or biochemistry at Johns Hopkins or Northwestern University. Although he has lived most of his life in Hamilton County, he also has a keen interest in language learning thanks to prior travel experiences, history courses, and people he’s interacted with on Twitter and Instagram. His passion for genetics and languages was apparent in how frequently he spoke about these topics during the research interview.

Anthony traces the genesis of his interest in genetics to his 8th grade biology class:

When we had the basic introductory stuff to genetics, I really fell in love with it and I was just amazed and…it was so much for me to comprehend at 14 years old and it was so much bigger than me and it’s still so much bigger than me and it will always be so much bigger than me and I love it. Like, it gives me chills. I really knew [at the time] it was going to be the thing that I do with my life.

Although the origin of his interests come from school, these days Anthony supplements his interest in genetics and microbiology with informal learning on his own time. As Anthony describes it, informal learning entails googling research topics that interest him, perusing the National Institute of Health’s website, and following links that researchers post on Twitter. In fact, he’s probably the only person I’ve ever heard say the words “I follow a lot of geneticists on social media.”
Anthony describes this kind of spontaneous, self-directed learning as the way he learns best. It’s a way of getting more information and conceptual knowledge about things that interest him, in contrast to the basic information presented in school lectures. As he puts it:

I can read a research paper and I’d get so much more than just a basic “smoking can increase the rate of atherosclerosis.” Like, I’d get so much more [from reading]. Smoking is gonna do this, it has this chemical, and that's gonna tax the endothelial lining and then the free radicals in the smoke are gonna bond to the endothelial lining in your arteries. You know, I can just get so much more than a teacher saying it.”

That’s not to say that Anthony is fundamentally opposed to formal schooling. On the contrary, he actively enjoys high school, which he views as a way “to open people up to more abstract and more high-level thinking if they haven’t had it before.” If anything, for Anthony, high school is a kind of jumping-off point for discovering basic information about the world that can be investigated further on his own time. This kind of interplay between the formal in the informal was also evident in how he described his burgeoning interest in learning the Cyrillic alphabet:

In AP World [History], we were learning about the Byzantine World. And after the Roman Empire fell, the Eastern half stayed alive and Russia was looking for a government to emulate. And they looked at the Latin West and they were like…this is in shambles, you’re in the Medieval age, we’re not gonna do this. So they emulated the Byzantine world and they took the Greek culture and they took the Greek alphabet because the Byzantine [Empire] forced it upon them. […] It just amazed me, that diffusion of the Greek language. And that’s how I became interested in that, that AP World History class. And then I told myself I’m gonna learn this alphabet. Because I follow a lot of Russian people on Instagram, too, so I thought, hmm, I’m gonna learn it.

In this case, Anthony’s interest in Cyrillic comes from a history class at school. But much like his independent learning about genetics, the actual time spent learning the alphabet happens outside the classroom, for his own purposes, on his own time.

In addition to being a vast informational / academic resource, the internet to Anthony is also a way of networking with people he wouldn’t ordinarily meet in his offline life, particularly those on the political and cultural periphery. He described to me the Russian people that he interacts with on Instagram:
They’re kind of in, like, the alternative scene in Russia. You know…oddly dressed, kind of on the fringes of society. These 18 to 19 year-old kids grew up right after the fall of the Soviet Union. It’s just a very unique culture and I wanted to see it. And I follow a lot of people like that, on the fringes of society. I don’t know, I think it’s interesting.

On Twitter as well, Anthony interacts with people from around the world: not only the aforementioned geneticists, but also individuals whose politics he aligns himself with. This, too, is a way for him to learn from other people that he might not ordinarily meet. As he explained it:

I’m very left-leaning, even into communism. And there is a whole sphere of Twitter that is communist. And it’s a bunch of young people - a lot of them of color – throughout the world who, you know, are not American, and a lot of them are seeing a byproduct of capitalism that a lot of Americans don’t usually see. And they kind of inspired me.

These interactions on social media fill an epistemological void for Anthony – that is, they are a source of different knowledge(s) that he hasn’t found in his “real life.” He explained that because far left-leaning political groups don’t really exist in Hamilton County, his only option has been to seek out these communities online.

He categorized this kind of learning (from people in spontaneous social media interactions) as being different from the self-directed, research-oriented learning he partakes in online when he wants to know more about languages or genetics. I’ll let him explain what he means:

It’s a different type of learning [on social media]. It’s not information but it’s a feeling. Talking about Instagram – there’s these communities out there of very non-mainstream people. And it’s beautiful. And that type of learning – learning about these people and their friend groups – that’s like a humanity learning. It’s like a shared understanding of life.

Anthony went on to compare this kind of “humanity learning” from social media to traveling. By interacting with others on social media, he saw himself as transcending the constraints of the physical in order to experience the world like a traveler would. Indeed, the educational value he gave to these interactions with strangers was analogous to the value he gave to trips he had taken to Puerto Rico throughout his life. As he sees it, the ephemera of social media – selfies of Russian youth on Instagram, Twitter dispatches from South American communists, and the like – are ways of authentically experiencing and learning from others.
Likewise, Anthony views his own online output as a genuine reflection of his offline identity and a way for others to learn from him:

I feel like the person I am online is like a true me. And when I can share that with people – when I say and do things online, I feel like people are seeing me as a complex, three-dimensional person rather than when I take someone’s order at [the sandwich shop] and they just see me as a cashier. […] Online I can offer so much more insight into my own thoughts.

It’s clear that Anthony values the control that the internet offers over one’s own image, of being seen holistically how he wants to be seen. In the same way, he values how even the most mundane posts on social media offer a window into the curated identities of other people.

Throughout his stories, Anthony positioned himself as a keen observer of humanity, as well as a self-directed and independent learner who appreciates the value of both formal and informal learning. He contrasted his own dedication to learning with other students - even those who are naturally intelligent - for whom “high school becomes a time to get high and get drunk.” His narratives, I think, offer an example of how informal online learning tools – even the seemingly mundane – can enrich the lives of learners who are already highly independent and motivated in their formal education. The way he describes “humanity learning,” too, demonstrate the ways in which online interactions can be sites of identity formation and learning. These findings will be discussed in more detail in the concluding section of this chapter. For now, I will move on to the narratives of the second participant.

5.2 Jordan

The second research participant I spoke with is Jordan, a 22 year-old rugby enthusiast who, at the time of the interview, had just graduated from university with a degree in Informatics. After moving around the country for a time at a very young age, she has spent the rest of her life in Hamilton County, where she currently resides. Although Jordan says she is proud of her degrees and the employment she has found in project management at a local software company, she is a self-described non-academic and prefers to dwell on her hobbies and passions outside of school and work. “Work is work,” she says. “I’m there to do a job and then leave.” In addition to her interests in rugby, which she has both played and coached, Jordan
enjoys choir, hanging out with friends, and watching vloggers on YouTube. She’s also passionate about politics and about using social media as a platform for influencing her social networks.

She traces this passion back to a debate that took place in one of her middle school social studies courses:

It was like 6th grade, I think, when it was Bush and Kerry [in the US presidential election]. We had a mock debate and I was the only one going for Kerry in a room full of Bushes. So that made me realize that I needed to stand up for what I actually believed in. […] I’m just passionate in what I believe in. I believe in equality for all.

Jordan speaks about social media – and Facebook in particular – as a space to make this stand for equality. On the one hand, it’s a place for her to defend her most deeply entrenched beliefs. Or as she puts it, “I will get in a Facebook fight with you if that’s what it takes to make you realize I’m not gonna change my mind.” On the other hand, her own sharing and posting about current events is something she hopes will encourage her more apathetic Facebook friends to get involved with politics and social justice. “You need to care! You live here!” she says, describing a recent conversation. “If I can make one person realize that [politics] is an important thing that they need to pay attention to, then I feel like I’ve done something.” As for her own political learning, Jordan likes to read a variety of sources online to stay up-to-date with news. “I would look at all the news sources even though they’re all biased,” she says. “I would look at all of them to see all their different opinions and then make my general assumption at the end of it so I wasn’t just going in blindly.”

Similar to Anthony, then, the internet for Jordan is a space for two kinds of activities – one that is motivated by self-directed information gathering and one that utilizes the networking aspects of social media sites. Jordan, however, spoke about how she uses different social networking sites in different ways. Facebook, as she mentioned, is used as a platform for public posts and interactions within her social network. Jordan uses Twitter, on the other hand, as a private space for a limited audience. She elaborates:

I feel like on my Twitter I can keep it more private. Like I said, my mom doesn’t see it, my employer doesn’t see it, my coworkers don’t see it. I don’t want my friends’ moms going on there. I’m very selective. So I feel like I can put personal things on there without it getting back through the grapevine and
my mom calling me “Oh, you can’t post stuff like that!” like I did when I was fourteen years old.

Twitter’s privacy settings allow Jordan not just to limit the audience for her posts, but also allow her to share content that she wouldn’t ordinarily post to Facebook. Because of this, her posts on Twitter and Facebook actually look quite different. Facebook contains more neutral posts, as well as the political advocacy that she mentioned earlier. Her Twitter contains highly personal posts that, as she explained, allow her to grapple with her mental health in a private space:

I like to have separate spaces. I like to be able to post and retweet thing that I find interesting or pertain to my current emotional status. Things like that. I definitely think they help me get my emotions across. I’ve always struggled with a lot of depression and anxiety since I was young and I feel like I have to get out my emotions some way, somehow.

This division of functions (and of privacy settings) between sites is not something Jordan has always done, but rather something she has learned to do over time. She explained that she used to post very publically about her emotions across all sites but that she has learned to contain those posts to more private spheres like Twitter and Tumblr. She has also learned to tone down or limit the political posts she puts on Facebook for the sake of maintaining friendships. “I’m not as Facebook fight-y as I used to be,” she says. She explained her motivations for this change by example:

There’s my oldest sister’s best friend. They’ve been best friends since sixth grade. […] Her parents and our parents are very close and I know her dad very well. Her dad and I are Facebook friends and he’s a die-hard Trump supporter. So anytime I post anything he comments on it and just goes at me. So I’ve gotten to the point where – I’m not gonna fight with someone’s dad that I’m close with. I’m not gonna do it. We have a friendship, I’m not gonna cross that line. That’s just dumb. We’re not gonna go anywhere with this. You’re not gonna change your mind, I’m not gonna change your mind. So I’ve just gotten to the point where I hide my posts from him.

Jordan went on to speak about how she has grown and how her habits on social media reflect this growth. She is easily reminded of her past social media habits, she says, thanks to the “memories” function on Facebook, which dredges up posts from your past. Although these
often make her cringe, Jordan thinks “I’m more ‘me’ now on social media than I ever have been.’

Indeed, Jordan has always felt comfortable being herself online, despite the fact that she regrets some of the ways she used to use social media. She spoke about how Tumblr and Twitter had enabled her to network with new friends who shared common interests, especially during high school, when she didn’t know many people who shared her niche interests. In her day-to-day life, on the other hand, she describes herself as “an oddball out,” both in her family and in Hamilton County at large, where she feels there are very few other “gay, biracial, child[ren] of an immigrant.” In high school, too, she felt alienated – not socially, but academically. She elaborates:

I definitely feel like high school was all lecture. All talking to you. Never doing anything. So it just kind of bleeds out. Like I just never grasped concepts because I can’t handle talking to me that this is how you do it. [My high school] thinks they’re preparing you for college. They think they’re preparing you for the rest of your life. Little do they know they didn’t prepare you for anything. […] I feel like high school was just a big long joke. I feel like I didn’t accomplish anything except become friends with some people, which I’m not friends with any of them now. And play sports.

Although she more than competently completed her high school and university degrees, she admits that she largely didn’t enjoy her experiences, skipped many days of school, and probably wouldn’t have passed her classes without online resources. Jordan also struggled with ADHD, which she thinks contributed to her lack of attention to lectures in high school and college. She sees the internet as a way for her to cope with this because it allows her to learn in her own way, at her own pace. “I would rather learn by doing it myself,” she explained. “I’d rather you put it in front of me and let me do it, than you try to give me a lecture on it and talk to me about it.” She added, tongue-in-cheek: “I feel like I Googled my college degree.”

In contrast to Anthony, Jordan’s stories illustrate how self-directed online learning is a valuable habit even for those students who don’t intrinsically enjoy school. In Jordan’s case, it was how she compensated for what she felt like was a lack of pedagogical relevance in high school. Additionally, social media gave Jordan a sense of belonging and to this day allows her a private space to vent her emotions. Jordan’s narratives also touch on the behaviors that
are unique to different social media sites. The different way she uses the internet – as an independent learning resource, as a space for political advocacy, as a site of personal growth, as a private diary – demonstrate how many different “hats” people wear when they are online. This complicates the idea of “informal learning” because it brings into question what can be considered learning online and indeed how many different kinds of learning happen online, from site-to-site, and even within one site. I will revisit this complication in the concluding section of this chapter, but for now I will proceed to the third research participant, whose narratives I think further problematize the ideas of informal learning and identity online.

5.3 Rachel

The third participant, Rachel, has spent most of her life so far in Hamilton County, where she remembers enjoying independence in the outdoors as a child. Now, she is completing her final year of high school and has her eye on college where she hopes to major in art and/or dance, something she’s been interested in since childhood. “Obviously every little kid is put into dance when they’re 3,” she explains. “But I think my own interest started around 12, as a professional.” She divides her interests between ballet and modern dance. For ballet, she dances with a company, but modern is something she usually does on her own time. She described her technique:

For modern, basically it’s just like turning on some music and doing whatever your body feels like. A lot of the times it does look really weird and you just choose a body part or an idea and that’s what you go with. And then you tweak it because at first it looks really weird and not like dancing.

Rachel supplements her at-home dance experimentation by watching video tutorials and dance covers on Instagram or YouTube. “A lot of them [will] teach about your body when you’re doing certain positions so you know how to do it safely,” she explained. “Or sometimes I follow a lot of accounts that I’ll learn choreography and variations from.”

Dance suits Rachel well because she is a self-described “hands-on learner.” She says she doesn’t get much from the standard high school classroom, so learning dance – both in her company and on her own – gives her a passion that she can fully and deeply know. As she explained, she prefers “just being able to do it and, like, grasp it physically.” She needs to be able to “create it so then it’s not just someone telling me it. I have to be able to create it
on my own so that I can understand it.” This kind of learning is something Rachel feels she didn’t experience much in high school. Although she likes learning, she found the teaching methods used in school to be lacking depth. She explained:

I think the way it’s set up is not a good focus for students. And it’s not very individual learning. It’s mostly them giving you information, you taking it, and then using it for a test and not for your actual learning experience. [...] Like today, we’re studying for our [exams] and instead of actually talking about the topics or anything we’re basically given facts about the wars and told to write that down and memorize it for our test and I don’t know anything about the actual wars.

As Rachel describes it, the learning she experiences in school tends to be neither personal nor theoretical. Because the focus is on “general knowledge” and information transmission, the lack of deep, conceptual understanding makes it hard to retain or apply in her life. She explained what she meant by providing a contrasting story: a high school literature class that did allow for a deep conceptual understanding.

When we’re learning transcendentalism, we’re not just talking about transcendentalists. Instead, she’s trying to teach us ideals, she’s trying to see if anyone has similar ideas to that and what their practice is today. Not just the facts about it, not just the history of it, but actually applying it into our lives and looking for it.

This highly personal learning is something that Rachel seeks out online, whether it’s something related to her dance practice or it’s an article she sees by happenstance on social media. Social media feels more personal, she explained, because she generally trusts the source of the information (her friends) more than she would at school (from teachers). “When a teacher’s telling you it, you’re just not gonna believe them, but when you’re looking on social media...you’re gonna look at [the topic] differently, even if it’s [from] the same article.” She admitted that this idea didn’t apply to every subject, but that it applies more when it comes to corruption and politics: two topics that she feels that teachers stay away from in the classroom. By contrast, reading about “the corrupt things that happen in America” online feels more relevant to Rachel because it comes from a tight social network that she trusts.

Hearing about her informal online learning experiences, I asked Rachel how her life would have been different without the internet and was surprised to hear her say that her formal
school experiences “would have been much better” without access to the internet. She elaborated:

Without the internet I would be a much better student. […] Because most of the time when you’re at school, especially with our iPads, 50% of the time you’re not doing schoolwork, you’re just sitting there and doing whatever on your iPad. Like I used to – before we had iPads – I would actually do my work and stuff but now I don’t really.

The irony here is that although Rachel sees the internet as a resource in her own informal learning, she acknowledges that it was also making her a bad student in a formal educational setting. She went on to explain that “good student” in this case is a definition that her school might use, not her. A “good student” according to her school, she says, is someone who pays attention and does the work required of her. Although she admits this is something that access to the internet distracts her from, it’s not something she aspires to be. “I don’t really care to be a good student in this school structure,” she stated.

Not being a “good student” doesn’t prevent Rachel from aspiring to be well-educated. She didn’t see a general mistrust of school to be a barrier from being educated, in other words. The way she was able to supplement her schoolwork with her own learning, she said, allows her be “well-educated and well-rounded.” Outside of school, she explained, it’s easier to be “more involved with health things, art, and then religion.” In addition to her own online learning, Rachel provided an example of an offline resource that’s helped her improve her writing: namely, a local artists’ workshop for young people. She elaborated:

[It’s] supposed to be this open environment for artists to share original writings, music, or any art. They can share it or they can get critique on it, whatever they want, really. It’s basically a little way to share art with each other. I started going because [my friend] had invited me to go because I started writing poetry. So then I started going and listening to a lot of the poets, so it inspired me to wanna write more and better. Which I do. […] I saw more writing styles than I was writing and I was able to develop a better voice for myself. Because when I went there I wasn’t really a writer.

This voice through is something Rachel felt like she needed to develop on her own, whether it’s through dance, through writing, or through her religious beliefs. These three things are a core part of who she is, particularly her beliefs. “My faith makes me as a person,” she explained. “I would interact with people completely different if I didn’t believe what I do,
because I feel like I wouldn’t be nearly as nice and I wouldn’t stand up for the things that I do.”

Rachel’s experiences with school, I think, complicate the interplay between formal and informal learning. Even as schools in the U.S. push to integrate up-to-date technologies in the classroom, these can be at odds with a traditional definition of how a good student ought to behave. Even though Rachel put a high value on her informal online learning, she saw a conflict between these activities and the learning required of her in school. Several times during the research interview, Rachel seemed to doubt whether the things she did on her own – dancing, reading articles from Twitter, watching choreography instructional videos, meeting with other young artists – counted as “learning” or “education.” Here, I think, lies another problem with the idea of “informal learning:” is it still learning if learners are unaware that it’s happening? And if so, how can we empower learners to bring these other kinds of learning to a formal setting? I will explore this question as well after accounting for the final participant’s narratives.

5.4 Evan

The fourth participant for this research, Evan, was a perfect fit for this project given his interests in computers and philosophy. He graduated from high school and is now attending university, where he studies Computer Science and Philosophy. A self-professed “child of the Midwest,” Evan grew up in Hamilton County and attends university not far away. Though he grew up a “computer geek” in general, these days his interests more specifically lie in software design and human interaction, i.e. “identifying the needs of people using the software and then going through the process of crafting an interface and coming up with a paradigm for how something would be used.” As he describes it, Evan has found his niche here in between sciences and the humanities. He spent much of his interview discussing these cross-disciplinary interests, as well as how his childhood hobbies have contributed to his chosen academic path.

“From when I was really young,” Evan begins, “I was interested in how things worked, so I was always kind of an inventor, machine person.” This interest in machines and in tinkering with things quickly led Evan to computers, which he saw as the “pinnacle of complex machinery.” His uncle helped him build his first computer around the age of 10 and he really
hasn’t gotten sick of them since. He outlined his growing interests from his childhood ex-
perimental phase to the present:

It kind of started from a tinkerer, technical perspective of like – oh! This is really fascinating technology. And that kind of traced myself through grade school. Probably right around junior high and high school is right around when I started working for [a healthcare software company]. I also did some stuff with [a media specialist] doing technical tasks in the school media center. That kind of connected in my mind the idea [that] I have technical skills that can be applied to meet needs that people have.

These days when he’s not in school, Evan continues to work for the healthcare software company. In short, computers have always been his passion and he plans to continue on his chosen career path throughout and after university.

Evan spoke about how he learns best in relation to the academic fields of computer science and philosophy. He saw these two fields as perfect for him because they mirrored the ways he enjoyed learning. He elaborated:

Traditionally I’ve always been a hands-on learner and I can learn something best when I have an opportunity to play with it. And that lends itself really well to technology and to most programming, so probably the two go hand in hand. The further I go, the more I think I’m required to learn by getting a really deep understanding of something. I think that’s part of why I like philosophy, because philosophy is all about getting deep to the logical roots of an idea and then establishing that logical basis and from there being able to construct any argument or thesis on top of that logical root.

Evan found that these two kinds of learning – hands-on and theoretical – fit together well. “What happens if you play around with things,” he explained, “is you start to learn that more theoretical groundwork.” This interplay between the practical and the theoretical is something that Evan not only saw as important in his own studies, but in all fields in general.

Evan spoke about the extent to which he experienced these two kinds of learning in his secondary school. Hands-on learning is something that Evan found was generally lacking in his formal education, but it was something he was able to easily make up for through tinkering at home or through his many computer-related part-time jobs. Learning through a “deep understanding” of something is he has found more in a university setting, where Evan
feels he is more in control over acquiring deep theoretical knowledge about something. He spoke at length about his experiences learning in high school, where he feels that, to some extent, he did come out with a deep theoretical understanding of the humanities. He related an example from his high school history class:

My senior year I was in a class that studied the [US] Constitution and the founding of the United States really in depth. To the point where it was like, I understand a lot more of the mindset of the founders and of what people were thinking and what the political philosophy of the day was. And that gives me a conceptual understanding of 18th Century America and the idea behind the US Government. So then I can look at history and predict what people would’ve thought at a particular time period. Like, what would have Alexander Hamilton thought about what Obama’s doing today? And I feel like I could actually start to answer a question like that because I have a better conceptual understanding of the mindset of the time.

However grateful he was to experience this conceptual learning in some humanities courses, Evan was frustrated to not find this kind of learning present in more technical courses in high school. “I really don’t like it when there’s a class that kind of intentionally avoids going into the logical theory behind something,” he explained. “I think the tragic thing in K-12 education is that that doesn’t happen in the STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics] fields.”

The internet has proven to be an invaluable resource for Evan for learning informally on his own time. On one hand, the collaboration offered by Web 2.0 advancements has enabled him to learn from other programmers as he writes code on his own or for work. He explained:

A lot of what I do as a programmer is I’m building off of libraries and off of tools that other people have already written and that’s why the Internet is a really useful resource. Because you can interact with developers and you can see what else is out there and you can understand what other problems people are running into.

This collaboration is essential to the work Evan does both formally and informally. In both cases, it acts as a kind of supplement to whatever technical project he’s working on, be it for school or for fun. The internet is also a valuable information-gathering tool for Evan. Again, this information can be used as a supplement to either his formal or informal learning. He explained this aspect, too:
A huge amount of time I spend [online] is just gathering and synthesizing information. [...] There’s a whole lot of reading and kind of learning stuff on my own that I’m interested in that I use the internet for. So it’s definitely not just something to get work done. I would say, like, in some ways learning things is a hobby and so I feel like the internet is enormously useful as a resource just for learning interesting things.

To learn these “interesting things”, Evan relies on resources like Wikipedia and YouTube, as well as his social networks, mainly Twitter and Facebook. Evan sees Facebook as “more social in nature,” and will click on anything interesting that his friends post. “My news feed is people I tend to directly know,” he explained, “and [I’m] usually seeing links that they’re sharing.” He thinks that Facebook posts and links tend to get more political because they’re intended for a wide audience (i.e. a person’s entire friend group). Twitter, on the other hand, Evan uses to find more specific information. He explained this difference:

Twitter, in contrast, is a little bit more technical, so my Twitter feed is generally a combination of software and CS kind of stuff? And then like policy, researcher types. I end up following some of the people connected to Snowden and the anti-corruption, free press journalists. So that tends to be a little bit more direct. And it’s specific interests that I have, kind of hobby interests, and Twitter will provide me stuff to click through and to read through there.

Like Jordan, Evan saw a difference between Facebook and Twitter, though many of his friends were present on both. He, too, thought that people “implicitly treat [Twitter] as if it’s more private” than Facebook.

Unlike Jordan, however, Evan tends not to post particularly private things on Facebook or Twitter. Although he values these social networks for the information they provide him, he rarely posts because he finds that posting doesn’t generate “valuable discussion”. Instead, he tends to use social media as a “bookmarking tool.” In the rare times that he does post his own content, he explained, he needs to feel composed and relaxed. He related a contrasting example from his time at university:

I’ve noticed for myself I’m much more inclined to post something when I’m in a more carefree state of mind. For example, the last semester of school was just very hellish and I had a lot of projects going on, so I was stressed out and I was not doing anything social media-related then. I guess it’s something I do
when I have free time, when I am like – oh, here’s something I’ve thought about that I want to share with everyone. So in the times when I’m really busy I’m still consuming social media because that’s kind of a recharging thing for me. But posting stuff, not necessarily. That’s a little more deliberate and takes a little bit more energy.

Evan related these cautious online habits to how he composes himself online. Offline, he says, he is a more “random” person, who tends to go on tangents. Online, though, he tends to behave conservatively by limiting and carefully structuring the thoughts that he does share with his social networks.

Evan’s narratives highlight the interplay between informal and formal learning. Although he uses online collaboration, social networks, and information resources as learning tools, these are not always easily separated from his formal learning. Indeed, Evan’s childhood experiences tinkering with computers led to his pursuit of computer science in his university studies. Likewise, his experiences in high school and university courses have driven him to further learning on his own time. This, I think, shows how formal education can work reciprocally with informal education, rather than as a necessarily opposing or separate force. I will revisit this idea – along with some others that were previously mentioned – in the following chapter.
6 FINDINGS – DIMENSIONS OF INFORMAL ONLINE LEARNING AND IDENTITY

As I have established in the fourth chapter, the previous chapter represents the first part of the findings in this research. It’s important to remember that these are not simple repetitions of what participants have said. Rather, the narratives are co-constructions of the participants and the researcher (Riessman, 2008). They have been presented in orientation to this thesis’ themes and research question: What and how do young adults tell about their online learning experiences and related identities? This chapter, then, presents the findings of the second stage of the data analysis. In this section, I will turn to a broader discussion of the four research participants’ narratives, looking specifically at how the emergent themes in the data might serve to answer the research question(s) (Polkinghorne, 1995). I will address each of these questions in turn.

6.1 Online and Learning Identities

To begin, let’s revisit one of the secondary research questions posed at the beginning of this research. How do young people see themselves when they tell about their online experiences? If not as learners, then what? I will begin by looking at how the participants told about their online identities in general. It was remarkable the extent to which they saw their online selves as authentic. Anthony described his online self as a “true me.” Rachel remarked “I don’t post fake stuff,” implying that she would only post things that genuinely reflected how she felt and thought. If anything, the participants saw themselves as truer online due to their ability to curate to some extent how they were perceived. Jordan said “I’m more me on social media” [emphasis added] because of how she posted. Anthony agreed, describing his online self as a “complex, three-dimensional person,” as opposed to his offline self, which was perceived contextually. Evan agreed that he was “authentic” online but made a distinction between being authentic and being the “same” as your offline self:

I tend to reserve what I’m posting online for things that are more thought of and kind of structured. So yeah, I don’t feel like I’m someone who uses social media in a way that’s kind of like as randomly as if you were talking to me in person. I think some people think they’re really similar? But they’re not. [laughs]
As I see it, the control offered to internet users – the ability to curate content, provide or withhold information, post thoughts and images – allowed the participants to craft or maintain a cohesive sense of self online. I had discussed in Chapter 2 how this curation of identity offers online users some degree of control over how their “self” was perceived by others online (Blanco Ramírez & Palu-ay, 2015). What was remarkable to discover was that the participants were aware of these self-branding and curation processes online. They experienced their online self as more or less an authentic reflection of their “true” self, despite the fact that they all knew they had at least partially curated these identities. Furthermore, the participants seemed to view this curation as normal. By “normal” I mean that they did not tell about it as something out of the ordinary, but rather as a continual process that emerged from the day-to-day use of social media. The implications of curation and online/offline identity could easily fill another thesis and will not be explored much further here. However, this “authentic” experience of online identity is important background as I turn more specifically to the topic of online learning identity. If the participants more or less viewed their online selves as genuine and cohesive, did they then view themselves as learners?

Although I have described many of the different kinds of informal learning that might take place online in Chapter 2, it’s clear that learners may not be aware of their learning, or indeed even believe that they are learning in their day-to-day internet activities (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Whereas formal educational settings create a signifying “learning environment,” the asynchronous and virtual nature of online environments don’t necessarily signal to users that they may be learning, perhaps prompting them to act as “consumers” rather than “learners.” (Cox, 2013; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Rachel’s narratives in particular, highlight the complicated view that young people have of themselves as internet users. On one hand, Rachel used the term “messing around” many times to describe the activities she engaged in online, suggesting that these activities were necessarily insignificant. She also saw herself as a bad student when she used social media during school hours, saying she was “just sitting there and doing whatever on [the] iPad.” On the other hand, Rachel thought that she was learning online in certain situations. She spoke about Instagram accounts that “teach you about your body when you’re doing certain [dance] positions.” Through Twitter, she said she would often learn about “politics or a lot of the world problems” through people’s posts and links. Rachel’s mixed terminology points to the dichotomy between “consumer” and “learner.” In some ways, Rachel saw herself as a learner when she used social media; in others, as a time waster and even a “bad student.”
Jordan also offered a mixed view of her own learning identity online. She used the term “research” when speaking about reading news reports and political journals online. She also referred to “online research” she did in supplement to her formal schooling, adding “I honestly don’t think I would’ve passed high school or college” without it. Jordan also valued Facebook as a platform for political activism, and a chance to share and learn from others’ posts. Yet she, too, described this very social media as a “time waster” that is “not useful in any purpose.” Where is this contrast coming from? One possibility is the school environment itself. Rachel spoke about a “school structure” that defined the distinction between a good student and a bad student as someone who avoided “distraction” and “did my work.” Jordan also expressed frustration at the expectations of schooling:

I wasn’t a school person. I don’t like school, it’s not my thing. It still isn’t my thing. I just don’t like the concept. I’m not academic at all. I was sports, I was show choir, I was hanging out with my friends. […] I just get distracted. I don’t know what’s going on. And it’s boring. I feel like I wasn’t learning much.

Jordan’s quotation above points to several activities through which learning can emerge (team activities, extracurriculars, music), and yet she did not view any of these as particularly “academic.” It’s clear that Jordan and Rachel had somewhat internalized someone else’s definition of a good learner or good learning and felt alienated from a school environment that didn’t suit them. To some extent, Jordan and Rachel both viewed the internet – particularly social media – as a distraction that necessarily hindered learning, even though they both admitted they had learned from it (and indeed from other informal or extracurricular activities besides). In part, this speaks to the many kinds of activities available online. While some may obviously be called “learning,” others decidedly are not. This finding is significant because it suggests that – at least in Jordan and Rachel’s case – the participants did not see themselves as informal online learners even when learning was actually happening.

### 6.2 Supplementary vs. Independent Informal Online Learning

This discussion transitions nicely to the second of the research sub-questions: How do the participants relate informal online learning to offline formal learning? To their personal goals? It’s clear that all the participants saw the internet as an invaluable informational resource, both as part of their formal studies and as a complement to them. Jordan, as I have mentioned, sarcastically stated “I Googled my college degree.” In Anthony’s narratives, he
spoke about how his courses in World History and Genetics had inspired him to research topics on his own online. Evan described an “even split” when using the Internet – half of the time it was related to school and half the time it was for something else. Rachel, finally, spoke about how she would re-evaluate or supplement school resources on her own time, since the information she could gather herself was more trustworthy to her. Based on these four narratives, I found that the internet’s potential as an informal learning resource was unquestioned. Its usefulness as a supplement to formal learning was evident in the participant’s experiences.

However, the participants did not so readily see a connection between online learning done for their own purposes and online learning done in or for school. Rachel, for instance, used YouTube and Instagram to learn more about dance, an activity she participates in outside of school. When it came to Twitter, she sought out information specifically that wouldn’t be taught in school. Evan, too, mentioned that the internet was “definitely not just something to get work done,” but was rather a resource for his own learning outside of school. When Anthony spoke about the people he followed on Instagram and Twitter, he spoke about “humanity learning” – a kind of learning that inspired him to travel and opened his mind to other cultures, languages, and ideas. Like Evan, he preferred to “go further” than what was offered to him in the classroom, by learning more specifically about the things that interested him. Finally, Jordan used Facebook as a platform for political activism and learning because it was a more private space that was separate from her school and work. What we find in these stories is that informal online learning offered the participants a separate, independent space for pursuing things that mattered to them. In the participants’ experiences, the internet offered them a level of self-directed, independent learning that was lacking in their “real life” – whether in formal education or elsewhere. Also noteworthy is that this informal online learning was not relegated to one specific kind of learning in these cases. Rather, the participants used a myriad of ways to learn online: through social media posts, through self-directed research, through spontaneous social interactions, through friendships, through online activism. It speaks again to the complexity of online activities and the many kinds of actions that can be considered to be informal online learning. Per Greenhow and Elwin’s (2015) articulation, it’s clear that the participants practiced “learning with formal, informal, and non-formal attributes across a wide range of contexts” and that they were able to exercise
“considerable authority over how they learn, when they learn, and with whom” (p. 10). Indeed, what emerged from the narratives in this study more generally was a discussion about independence, authority, and learning.

6.3 Learning Values

To conclude, then, let’s look at the last of the research sub-questions: What kind of learning do students value? Looking again at the participants’ narratives, the overwhelming answer was “hands-on” and “independent.” Evan, for instance, spoke about his “tinkering” phase with computers as an example of this. “Traditionally I’ve always been a hands-on learner,” he said. “I can learn something best when I have an opportunity to play with it.” Rachel described hands-on learning as “just being able to do it and, like, grasp it physically…being able to create it so then it’s not just someone telling me it.” This was something she saw in her private dance practice, but not in school, for the most part. Jordan also separated hands-on learning from lecture. “I would rather learn by doing it itself,” she asserted. “I’d rather you put it in front of me and let me do it, than you try to give me a lecture on it and talk to me about it.” Anthony saw independent learning as his preferred style, claiming that on his own time he “can just get so much more than a teacher saying it.” It’s curious that all four participants preferred similar kinds of learning. It’s also remarkable that they described formal classes as generally lecture-based and frustrating for those who preferred more self-directed or tactile learning. Evan’s narrative comparing high school and university courses, I think, sums up the crux of that frustration:

The way I remember it is like, a high school style lecture is, you’ll lecture and kind of set up a checkpoint and it’s like, ok, I’ve taught this, now we should kind of make sure everyone can get to this point of understanding. And then you have homework, you have in-class assignments and activities and that’s how the teacher works on a more individual level to make sure that every student understands the basic material up to a certain point. And that is just removed in a college setting. […] A college-style lecture is like, here is the information, I’m going to go over it so you can take notes, but it’s up to the student to like actually reach that level of understanding. So I’ve kind of liked the college setting more because it enable me to learn in a way that’s more appropriate for myself? It’s giving me more control over understanding par-
ticular material. And then high school, yeah, it’s more like you get to the low-
est common denominator and slowly move it up so that everyone’s moving at a similar pace. Which, you know, it’s not news that that’s really frustrating to people who do understanding something. [emphasis added]

It’s important to put these frustrations in perspective. As I have highlighted in their narratives, these students did not have overwhelmingly bad formal learning experiences. Even Rachel, who admittedly didn’t like school, provided examples of classes in high school that went beyond didactic lecture-based learning to provide her with learning that felt personally relevant (and therefore more “hands-on”). What their narratives about high school do suggest, however, is that they had all experienced formal learning that felt irrelevant to them. It’s no wonder, then, that when the internet provided them with a chance to partake in independent learning about subjects that mattered to them, they seized the opportunity.

This concludes the findings section of the thesis. Further conclusion and discussion about the findings will be offered in Chapter 8, but first it’s important to briefly pause and attend to an assessment of trustworthiness and ethics in this research project.
7 TRUSTWORTHINESS AND ETHICS

Traditionally, research (particularly for a thesis) is assessed according to the standards of reliability and validity. The criteria for reliability and validity come from the positivist tradition in quantitative research and essentially seek to understand the extent to which research results are consistent, accurate, repeatable, and/or generalizable (Golafshani, 2003). These measures become trickier in qualitative studies such as this one, which does not fall under the positivist paradigm and which does not necessarily seek to generate replicable or temporally consistent research. Healy and Perry (2000) maintain instead that the quality of research ought to instead be judged on the terms of the paradigm it falls under. To that end, much qualitative research these days evaluates the trustworthiness, dependability, or consistency of the results, as these are more accurate measures of quality in qualitative paradigms (Loh, 2013). Thus, in this thesis I will use the term Trustworthiness (rather than Reliability and Validity) to assess the quality and dependability of the research and its results.

Assessing trustworthiness and quality in the social constructivist paradigm needs to ask a few questions of the research. First, to what extent were the chosen narrative methods appropriate given the primary research question of the thesis (Loh, 2013)? I have already discussed (in Chapters 1 and 4) why narrative methodology was chosen for this thesis so the focus of this chapter will move beyond the methodological choice and consider its implications. To what extent was narrative methodology used to get at “reliable and diverse construction of realities” in social constructivist research (Golafshani, 2003, p. 604)? Furthermore, how reliable were the representations of narratives in the thesis, and how well do they open spaces for the voices of the participants (Shuman, 2005)? In this chapter, I will discuss these issues in relation to the thesis, and also account for how this thesis attempted to adhere to standards of ethical research.

As with most qualitative methodologies, the trustworthiness of the research rests squarely on the researcher’s forthrightness. Narrative data is (usually) collected either by observation or through direct interviews with the subject(s). In both cases, the data analysis varies depending on the researcher’s own intersectional situatedness, their epistemological perspectives, and the research aims of the project (Riessman, 2008, p. 188). Thus, if two different researchers analyze the same narrative data, they will likely end up with two entirely different results. Much of Fina and Georgakopoulou’s recent handbook on narrative inquiry
(2015) is devoted to reconsidering how the presence of the researcher affects narrative data. They warn narrative researchers to temper the self-indulgent nature of their work by reconsidering how much of their analysis is driven by their own political goals. They describe the paradox of the researcher’s position in this way:

> On the one hand researchers know that they participate in the process of production and reception of stories, while on the other hand they also want to use the products of those processes as windows into understandings of the social world. (p. 12)

Thus, the trustworthiness of narrative research turns on how transparently the researcher discloses their goals and their presence in the text. If we acknowledge that narrative research is somewhat co-authored by both the narrator(s) and the researcher(s), then the researcher ought to be honest about this fact. “Stories don’t fall from the sky,” as Riessman puts it (2008, p. 215). Narrative research can be trustworthy when it is honest about the multiplicity of views at work within it. To this end, I have taken several steps throughout the thesis project to be honest about my position. First, I acknowledged my own role as a researcher in the planning, analysis, and writing of this work, e.g. by including my own experiences in the context of the study (Chapter 3) and by discussing the researcher’s position in narrative inquiry (Chapter 4). I also outlined the geopolitical context of Hamilton County and the United States as potential players in the subtext of the research interviews (Chapter 3). By doing so, I have attempted to acknowledge the “kaleidoscopic reality” at work within the research, which includes the voices of not only the participants but also the researcher (Spector-Mercer, 2010, p. 217).

A further challenge of trustworthy narrative research is trying to create space for the voices of participants without compromising their contribution or swaying them to answer in one way or another. Although some level of appropriation is inherent in re-telling narratives, this kind of narrative analysis runs the risk of being emancipatory only on the researcher’s terms. As Shuman (2005) points out:

> Inspiration, redemption, emancipation, even subversion, require the appropriation of others’ stories. […] This is not in itself troubling, nor do I dispute the redemptive or emancipatory possibilities of storytelling. In listening to or even retelling other people’s stories, narrators become witnesses to others’ experiences, and storytelling provides some hope for understanding across differences. But I propose a caution. The appropriation of stories can create voyeurs rather than witnesses and can foreclose meaning rather than open lines of inquiry and understanding. (p. 5)
The potential trustworthiness of this research, then, again turns on the motives of the researcher and the care with which the researcher treats their participants. In the context of this thesis, I’ve taken several steps to make this happen. The first step was to create open-ended interview situations in which the participants would hopefully be able to respond personally and openly. Indeed, a good narrative interview should not have too much talking on the part of the researcher. Rather, the researcher needs to ask broad questions that prompt participants to respond in their own way (Seidman, 1991). This process was detailed in Chapter 4 and the general interview questions are provided in Appendix 2. My goal was not to get the participants to answer one way or another, but rather to hear the details of their own particular experiences. In the analysis of the data, too, I have taken care to not appropriate the narratives of the participants for my own purposes, but rather to create separate spaces for their narratives in Chapter 5, thereby highlighting each individual voice. I did not want to end this thesis with one “answer” across all participants. On the contrary, by using the semi-structured narrative interview format and the two-part presentation of the findings, I wanted to highlight the complexity and diversity of experiences at work in the research.

To conclude, a word about ethics in the research. Given that this research was conceived of, written in, and published for an educational institution in Finland, the Finnish Research Advisory Board’s (2009) standards for ethical procedure were used at every stage in planning and conducting this research. Essentially, their guidelines advise researchers to respect the autonomy of their research subjects, to avoid harm, and to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the data (p. 5). In the context of this project, that meant that I needed to first allow the participants to consent to the terms of the research (the full form for which can be reviewed in Appendix 1). After the interviews, the data was stored on an encrypted hard drive that was only accessible to the researcher. After transcribing the interviews, I combed the transcripts for identifying information (names of people, places, specific activities, etc.) and removed them in order to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants. While conducting the analysis, participants were occasionally consulted about unclear details to ensure that their thoughts were represented accurately in the thesis. Participants also had the right to withdraw their participation at any time, or to review a full copy of the manuscript before publication.
On the whole, I have attempted to adhere to high standards of quality and trustworthy qualitative research by acknowledging the researcher’s role in the thesis, by allowing for complexity and individuality in the data analysis, and by opening my research to sustained critique from a thesis advisor and outside readers. In terms of ethics, I have followed well-established national guidelines for ethical research procedure in order to assure that the final product was fair and safe for the participants.
8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I will offer concluding thoughts on the thesis, attempting to both summarize the findings and connect the thesis to past and future research. As I established in the introduction, one of the aims of this research project was to offer educators, administrators, and parents a glimpse into how young people have experienced learning vis-à-vis the online environments that are so often talked about (and worried about). Inasmuch as my research curated four rich narratives from the participants (in 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, and 5.4), I believe that this first task has been accomplished. I consider these four narratives a “finding” of the research because they successfully uncover the complexity and diversity of informal online (and offline) learning experiences and thereby offer a chance for us to learn from the voices of students. This finding is not one “answer” to the question of how to reconcile online environments and education; rather, it gets at the multitude of voices and ideas that might inform educational policy and pedagogy decisions moving forward.

The findings also offered some more direct answers to the research questions (in 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3). First, in relation to the question of how online identity was experienced, the narratives indicated that the participants experience their online self as more or less an authentic reflection of their true self. Simultaneously, the participants understood that these online identities were, to some extent, self-curated. When it came to online learning identity, the responses were mixed. On one hand, the participants were able to reflect and relate some things they had learned about the world and themselves through their online experiences. On the other hand, at least two of the participants did not see themselves as “learners” in their day to day online experiences, and even viewed their online habits as hindrances to their education. The participants nonetheless used informal online learning tools to access the things that mattered most to them. Some of these, like Anthony’s study of Cyrillic or Evan’s continued use of online collaborative tools, were used in relation to or as supplements for things that they had learned in a formal education setting. Others, like Jordan’s online political advocacy or Anthony’s digital friendships with strangers on Instagram and Twitter, were carried out online because their lives offline did not offer them the opportunity to partake in those activities. Finally, the participants discussed how valuable independent learning was to them. What they valued from informal online learning experiences was the opportunity for them to explore topics that mattered most to them.
I want to continue to comment on these findings in relation to past and future research, but with a caveat. Inasmuch as this research does not purport to be a positivist, generalizable, repeatable scientific work, the findings of this work are very likely not replicable outside the very specific temporal, geographical, and individual confines of this research (Golafshani, 2003). The thesis respects the unique, situated perspectives of the four participants and makes no claims that their views are generalizable to the local, national, or global population of young people. What this research does aim to do is to bring their voices into a broad dialogue about the relation among online environments, identity, and education. I want to be clear that as I relate the findings of this thesis to larger issues within the academy and beyond, I am not trying to generalize the participants’ experiences down to a few talking points. Instead, I am trying to distill what I have learned from the narratives, and to bring that learning into larger academic conversations.

One issue that has left me hanging is the question of whether or not people see themselves as learners when they partake in informal online learning. The findings from this thesis indicate that there is no easy answer to this question. It was encouraging to see that the participants in the research had had informal online learning experiences, but rather discouraging to hear some of them discount these experiences in the same breath. What I think this suggests is a disconnect between what is expected of us online (passive consumption, time wasting) and what we consider to be “real” learning (in a school, with a teacher present). This finding also speaks the somewhat “porous” boundary between formal and informal learning and the challenge of integrating internet-based learning in education (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016, p. 11). Bennett and Maton (2010) give a compelling challenge to reconsider these boundaries:

We also need to move beyond a simple dichotomy between ‘everyday’ and ‘education.’ In reality, young people engage in a wide range of different contexts, many of which entail learning in more or less formalized ways, and even within educational institutions there exists an array of learning settings. The most useful stance therefore is to strive to understand what knowledge and assumptions students bring to academic contexts from other aspects of their lives, and what that means to teaching and learning. (p. 326)

Future research in this field, then, ought to explore further what students and teachers alike consider to be “learning,” and also how educators can move past the consumption model of
the internet to encourage online formal and informal learning. The challenge is to bring educators and students in dialogue together in order to move towards a truly relevant, student-centered pedagogy.

Another topic that needs continued exploration is online identity. Many have written on the subject already, but the constantly evolving nature of virtual platforms requires that we consider it anew in different contexts (Blanco Ramírez & Palu-ay, 2015). At first I was not necessarily going to even talk about identity in this research, but as the thesis project developed, I found that it was at the heart of the theory and methodology I was considering. As I see it, this thesis only scratched the surface of online identity and learning. Something to consider for future research is the idea of how different people enact different identities on different online platforms (Suler, 2002). It was interesting, for instance, how Jordan performed very different identities across social media platforms. On Twitter, she saw herself as honest and unfiltered. On Facebook, she performed her role as an informed political activist. In further research, then, I would be curious to examine user experiences of identity on one specific platform, much like Marwick and Boyd’s (2011) study of Twitter and identity performance. Understanding how users of these platforms see themselves can help us make better decisions when it comes to regulating or harnessing their use as informal or formal learning tools.

Lastly, I agree with Greenhow and Lewin (2016) that further study of informal online learning needs to better engage with the topics of new literacies, particularly critical media/digital literacy. The current media literacy movement in the U.S. has made inroads into high schools and attempts to provide communication competencies to students across multiple kinds of media – music, video, Internet, Web 2.0, etc. (Kellner & Share, 2008). What this particular kind of media literacy education does not give students, however, is the transformative potential of critical skills that might allow students to go beyond analysis of digitally mediated texts towards a critical understanding of power and emancipation (Kellner & Share, 2008). Online spaces offer a potential site for the development of these critical skills that are so far lacking in formal media literacy education. Greenhow and Lewin (2016) elaborate:

Educators and educational researchers might do well to suspend a rush to judgement that young people’s leisure time, social media practices are neces-
sarily a waste of time or downright harmful to their becoming informed, literate, and engaged citizens. On the contrary, they argue for greater understanding of how young people’s participatory media practices in third spaces between formal schooling and home might be designed to facilitate the kind of social-academic resources that support students towards becoming educated and fully-contributing society members. (p. 24)

Where does this intersect with informal online learning? Judging by the participants in my study, students are politically engaged online and are perhaps picking up some of these critical literacy skills on their own. Jordan and Rachel’s narratives in particular suggested that they experienced their secondary schools as kind of awkward, quasi-neutral zones where the critical knowledge they had acquired independently would not be welcome. And yet, the participants in this study were indeed critically engaging with some tough and relevant political topics online. If schools want to be at the cusp of educating for critical literacies, then they ought to look no further than some of the online learning that is happening at the students’ fingertips.

To that end, a final suggestion for further research in this field. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, one of the motivations for writing this thesis was to join in the conversation about how technology affects our lives, particularly in the realm of education. One advantage of choosing this particular topic is that there has been no shortage of research written already in regards to social media, online identities, and informal online learning (Greenhow 2016). Since the beginning of the Web 2.0 movement in the early 2000s, researchers have been keen to know how (and if) students learn in online environments, both formally and informally. They understand that educating “digital natives” will be a new challenge and that locating the particular sites of these generational learning differences is an important academic challenge (Selwyn, 2009). What these studies have lacked to a large extent is the voices and participation of learners (Bennett & Maton, 2010; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). This is the “gap” within which I have tried to position this research, and a focus that I would suggest for future study of informal online learning, and its related fields: digital natives, identity formation, digital literacy, critical media literacies and policy planning. As I see it, the field of informal online learning (and learning in general!) needs more research that gets down to the level of the individual – whether through ethnography, narrative, or discourse –
and tries to understand up close the experiences of those partaking in these very new technological landscapes. Their voices have a place within the research, as they help us to understand phenomena in ways that larger-scale quantitative methodologies cannot.

On that note, I want to conclude by providing a tweet (Fig. 1) that came across my Twitter feed as I was in the beginning stages of this thesis project.

![Motivating Tweet (2015)](image)

I appreciate this tweet for several reasons. Like the best tweets, it is simultaneously brief and profound. It says in a few short words what I have been trying to get at with an entire thesis. Its source is humble and hardly academic – the tweet originated from a fan account of the boy band One Direction and was retweeted on my feed by a casual online acquaintance. And yet, despite its brevity and informality, it demonstrates the kind of deep, critical learning that can accumulate from the banal and sometimes inane milieu of a social media website. It asks us to pause and consider what is actually happening in these online environments and challenges us to listen to the voices and experiences of the people using them. My hope is that this thesis also acts a challenge to listen better to students – whether when making policy decisions or in conducting research. It might just lead to a deeper understanding of the technologies and practices of 2016 and beyond.
9 REFERENCES


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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Research Consent Form

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

This form details the purpose of this study, a description of the involvement required and your rights as a participant. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into narratives about social media and learning. The methods that will be used to meet this purpose include:

- one-on-one interviews (includes handwritten notes and an audio recording)
- possible follow-up questions (later on during the research process)

You are encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns at any time about the nature of the study or the methods I am using. Please contact me anytime at the e-mail address listed below.

- Josh Hall – xxxxxxxxxxx@xxxxx.com

Our discussion will be recorded to help me accurately capture your insights in your own words and will only be heard by me for the purpose of this study. The data will be stored securely on a private (encrypted) hard drive and will not be uploaded to collaborative or cloud servers. This interview is voluntary. You also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. In the event you choose to withdraw from the study all information you provide (including recordings) will be deleted and omitted from the final thesis.

Insights gathered by you and other participants will be used in writing an M.A. thesis, which will be read by my professor(s) and potentially published / shared with my cohort. Though direct quotes from you may be used in the paper, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous. If you would like to review the manuscript, you may request to see it before publication.

By signing this consent form I certify that I, ____________________________, agree to the terms of the interview as outlined above.
This consent form was created using the Finnish National Ethics Advisory Board guidelines on research ethics.
Appendix 2 – Interview Questions for the Thesis Project

Identity
- Do you think you are the same person online as you are offline? Why / why not?
- How do you think growing up with the Internet has affected you as a person?

Learning
- Tell me about things you learned that you’re passionate about. How did you go about learning these things?
- Do you think you learn differently in school and online? How so?
- Tell me about an especially good / negative experience in class or at school.
- How do you think you learn best? What are you interested in learning more about?

Social Media / the Internet
- How do you use the Internet? What kind of things do you do that you think not a lot of your friends “in real life” do?
- Why do you use social media?
- Tell me about something you’ve learned online / through social media that you didn’t learn in school.
- Can you remember some significant experiences that happened to you online?
  What happened?