
Cyworld is my world: Korean adult experiences in an online community for learning

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Abstract: This article introduces Cyworld, a popular online social networking service in South Korea, and explores it as a potential context in which informal learning occurs through social activities and communication. Based on the results of an online survey, this article discusses (a) the nature of social activities in Cyworld in terms of informal adult learning, (b) user perception of online activities in relation to learning, and (c) the relationship between the users' perception of the online activities and their definitions of learning (*i.e.*, learning as acquisition or as reflection). The article concludes that Cyworld appears to be a meaningful context that facilitates informal learning, and that users who emphasise a meaning-making process for learning perceive that mini-homepage activities are both learning-related and constructive.

Keywords: online community; adult learning; informal learning; internet technology; web-based learning environments; South Korea; Cyworld.

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1 Introduction

With the rapid diffusion of internet technology, people are processing various activities in online contexts. In terms of these online activities, Cyworld¹ is one of the popular online social networking spaces and has become a social phenomenon in South Korea. Many Cyworld users spend a considerable number of hours communicating with others, sharing their experiences, information and knowledge, and thus creating and strengthening their social networks.

What makes the users continue to engage in the social activities offered at Cyworld? What kinds of benefits do the users expect and actually gain from these social networks? From the viewpoint of educational researchers, a learning process can be derived from these social activities, especially as a form of adult informal learning, since adult users explore the services of Cyworld and learn what they need to learn with or without such intentions. Therefore, the purposes of this article are:

- to understand the nature of social activities in Cyworld
- to examine these social activities as a learning process based on the theoretical framework of informal learning
- to suggest meaningful ways of using this type of online service for learning in daily life.

1.1 *Internet uses in South Korea*

According to the *Computer Industry Almanac* (CIA, 2006), the worldwide number of internet users surpassed 1 billion in 2005 – greatly increased from only 45 million in 1995 and 420 million in 2000. Among the top 15 countries in internet usage, South Korea rests in seventh place in number of internet users (CIA, 2006). South Korea's enthusiasm for internet usage has indeed been remarkable: As of December 2005, the number of internet users in South Korea was over 33 million or approximately 67% of South Korea's population (CIA, 2006). The Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC, 2005) reports as the results of a survey that Korean internet users spend an average of 13.3 hours a week using the internet. These statistics have contributed to the worldwide recognition of Korea as one of the leading IT countries.

Exactly what do Koreans do through the internet? According to the results of the MIC survey, Koreans use the internet for e-mail (86.9%), searching for information (86.9%), and entertainment, including music, movies, magazines, *etc.* (78.7%). In addition, 46.5% of Korean internet users access blogs or mini-homepage sites, and 37.1% operate their own blogs or mini-homepages (MIC, 2005).

Among the many kinds of online activities, online communication takes up a significant part of many Koreans' lives. In particular, Cyworld is very popular and used heavily in South Korea. Cyworld is "an advanced blogging site which interconnects personal homepages, encouraging users to form a network with friends or colleagues" (Russo and Watkins, 2005, p.12). Russo and Watkins introduced Cyworld as a successful example of online communities, so the growth and popularity of Cyworld seem to be worth further notice and study: Since the site was launched in 2001, its number of users has reached almost one-third of the total Korean population, equivalent to 15 million (Moon, 2005). In addition, over 90% of internet users in their 20's (Yoo, 2005) have registered on Cyworld.

The amazing internet penetration rates in South Korea have allowed Cyworld to expand its services to China and Japan beyond national boundaries. In addition to these Asian countries, Cyworld has recently opened an English version of its service in the USA. The launch of US Cyworld¹ has been often compared to MySpace,² which is currently one of the most popular social networking sites in the USA (Jacobs, 2006; Schonfeld, 2006).

1.2 Features of Cyworld

One of the main features of Cyworld is its 'mini-hompi' (see Figure 1), which is a smaller version of an individual homepage. This feature adapts simple tool designs that enable users to show their intended identity by using such concepts as mini-me (*i.e.*, avatar) and mini-room. A mini-hompi is made up of a photo album, a bulletin board, a diary, a jukebox, and a guest book.

Figure 1 Snapshot of a sample mini-hompi



In addition to providing a representation of each individual, Cyworld as a whole presents a social network for interaction. 'Cyworld' literally means 'relationship world' in Korean, so one of the characteristics of Cyworld is *Ilchons*, which is referred to as 'neighbours' in the US version and are buddy relationships formed by on- and off-connections. Another typical characteristic of Cyworld is 'wave riding', which is described as follows: "when you're reading posts on bulletin boards or looking at photo files, you can click on the name of someone who has added a remark or photo you find interesting and you'll be transported to that person's digital room" (Moon, 2005). This function allows Cyworld users to create, maintain and strengthen social relationships. Hence, many users of Cyworld spend several hours a day creating their own mini-hompis, browsing others' mini-hompis, and communicating with other users.

Russo and Watkins (2005, p.13) argue that, in contrast to other online communities that are mostly used "to further political, social or historic causes, Cyworld audiences use this site to publish their own creative efforts and to explore the possibilities of community co-creation". In other words, the main reasons for most people to use Cyworld are self-expression and social networking.

Given the popularity of Cyworld, what do the users within this online social network gain? Most studies that refer to Cyworld have focused on issues of internet technology in South Korea and have used the popularity of the format to demonstrate the 'step forward' features of Cyworld in terms of technology development (Kim and Galliers, 2006; Lee *et al.*, 2006) and the growth of current digital cultures (Russo and Watkins, 2005). Although its features have been spotlighted as factors that facilitate online communications, the meanings of its online activities in a social context have not been studied significantly. As one uses Cyworld to interact with others and express oneself, how can these kinds of activities be valued specifically? What are the meanings of these activities to individual users and in general to the internet culture?

The inquiry of this study was derived from these questions. A potential significance of Cyworld activities seems to correspond to the learning process that occurs in the context of social activities in everyday situations, in particular as a form of informal learning (Livingstone, 2001). Based on these perspectives, this article purports to investigate the meaning of social activities in the Cyworld environment in light of adult informal learning. In other words, the investigation focuses on the notions of informal learning as a predominant form of learning at the adult stage and examines the online community as an everyday context for learners where meaningful informal learning can both emerge and be facilitated. Therefore, specific research questions for this study were as follows:

- Why and how do people use Cyworld, in particular individual mini-hompis as the centre of Cyworld activities?
- How do the users perceive their mini-hompi activities in terms of adult informal learning?
- What are the relationships between the users' perceptions of learning and their ongoing activities in Cyworld's online community?

2 The conceptual framework for the study

For this study, conceptual discussions were followed regarding: (a) the principal views of informal learning in the adult stage, (b) the process of adult informal learning and (c) the context of online communities in which learning occurs.

2.1 *Informal learning in the adult stage*

Informal learning is a significant form of learning in the adult stage. It is different from formal learning, which is “typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured” (Marsick and Watkins, 2001, p.25). It is different from nonformal learning as well, which refers to learning that people opt for in order to acquire knowledge or skills with the assistance of organised curricula and teachers. Informal learning refers to those forms of learning “in which we engage without direct reliance on a teacher or an externally organized curriculum” (Livingstone, 2001, p.3).

Informal learning has been defined as an important and predominant form of learning in adult lives. However, it is easy to underestimate how informal learning is practised in our lives because it is rarely intended to be explicit and learners are mostly unaware of it. In terms of the space where informal learning occurs, it is hard as well to pinpoint specific locales because the learning may be present everywhere in our daily routine, including at work, in family affairs, and in social interactions (Marsick and Watkins, 2001). It is often addressed as an ‘iceberg’ image (Tough, 1978; Tough, 2002; Livingstone, 2002) because so much of informal learning is invisible; thus informal learning has received little attention in research on adult learning. Formal or nonformal learning, on the other hand, has been extensively explored and studied.

Recently, however, scholars in adult education have started to explore how informal learning occurs in every part of the lives of adults and how effectively that learning enriches adults with tangible learning outcomes (Livingstone, 2001; 2002; Schugurensky, 2000; Kee, 2000) because of its learner-centred focus and close link to the life experiences of adults. Researchers have proposed their own views and perspectives in an attempt to understand informal learning, with its various definitions and research views on its characteristics and implications for both adult learners and educators (Livingstone, 2001; 2002; Mitchell and Livingstone, 2002; Schugurensky, 2000; Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Tough, 2002). In this article, some of the principal views on informal learning are addressed, including:

- informal learning is free from curriculum or institutional components
- informal learning occurs either intentionally or incidentally
- learners are a central agency in informal learning
- informal learning is a social phenomenon that takes place in various social contexts.

First, informal learning is distinctive from formal or nonformal education and/or learning in that it is free from arranged curriculum or institutional elements (Livingstone, 2001; Schugurensky, 2000; Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Tough, 2002). According to Livingstone (2001, p.5), informal learning is “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally

imposed curricular criteria". This definition often reveals the 'residual' characteristic of informal learning (Schugurensky, 2000). While nonformal education is defined as a residual category (anything that is not formal education), informal learning becomes the remainder of the residual category (anything that it is neither formal nor nonformal). This residual characteristic of informal learning forces one to assume how extensive the range of informal learning can be and, in turn, brings forth concerns about realising that the boundary of informal learning can be blurred owing to its extensiveness. This ill-defined boundary in informal learning is mentioned by many scholars. For Marsick and Watkins (2001), most informal learning is integrated with daily routines, such as social activities, and the learning is often elusive because learning and lives do simultaneously exist and some of the learning is often simply considered as some kind of lived experiences.

Second, informal learning may not be highly conscious. Informal learning includes both intentional and incidental forms of learning (Marsick and Watkins, 2001) and incidental learning takes place mainly as a by-product of other activities and is "largely unintentional, unexamined and embedded in people's closely held belief systems" (Watkins and Marsick, 1992, p.288). It may or may not accompany any specific awareness that learning has occurred. Therefore, the terms 'intention' and 'awareness' form one of the important criteria that help scholars to categorise informal learning into several subsets.

For example, Schugurensky (2000) categorises three types of informal learning based on intention and awareness: self-directed learning, incidental learning and tacit learning. Self-directed learning is intentional and perceived well by learners; incidental learning refers to the learning experiences that "occur when the learner did not have any previous intention of learning something out of that experience, but after the experience she or he becomes aware that some learning has taken place" (Schugurensky, 2000, p.5). Tacit learning is depicted as "the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors, and skills, *etc.* that occur during everyday life" (Schugurensky, 2000, p.5). In the case of tacit learning, it is often missed that learning is taking place because people do not intend to learn nor are aware of learning taking place. From this perspective, informal learning in many cases may be the result of significant unplanned or unexpected events (Marsick and Watkins, 2001), which contributes to its invisibility and, accordingly, underestimation (Mitchell and Livingstone, 2002).

Third, learners are located at the centre in informal learning. Learners are the primary agency of informal learning (Livingstone, 2001), because learning is conceived by the learners initially, and the control of the learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner (Marsick and Watkins, 2001) throughout the process. Emphasising the learner-centredness of informal learning, Marsick and Watkins (2001) proposed a way to enhance the outcome of informal learning by increasing the awareness of learners. In their daily lives, individual learners are centred in their experiences so as to coordinate their experiences or discover meanings from them (Kolb, 1984; Jarvis, 1987; Kee, 2000). Therefore, individuals who want to conduct learning in efficient ways can benefit by increasing their own awareness of the learning process that is embedded in their various life experiences.

Fourth, informal learning is a social phenomenon (Tough, 2002), influenced by the contexts which may either enhance or inhibit meaningful learning. This means that multiple numbers of people are engaged in informal learning, and therefore, the contexts of people's multifaceted social interactions will influence how the learning is conducted

(Fenwick and Tennant, 2004). This social dimension of informal learning may shatter one of the stereotypes – that informal learning is a more isolated form of learning where only the learners themselves are engaged in the learning (Tough, 2002). In the context of informal learning, there often exist friends, relatives, neighbours and co-workers who bring useful and/or meaningful interactions to the process. Therefore, activities such as networking, coaching and mentoring, and working in teams are good examples of settings where informal learning takes place (Garrick, 1998; Marsick and Watkins, 2001).

2.2 *The processes of adult informal learning*

There is no consensus regarding the definition of the adult learning process. However, adult learning is considered a complex process that not only includes the systematic acquisition and accumulation of information, but also embraces “making sense of our lives, transforming not just what we learn but the way we learn, and it [adult learning] is absorbing, imagining, intuiting, and learning informally with others” (Merriam, 2001, p.96).

Theories of adult learning offer useful and multiple perspectives that are useful, as the adult learners may adopt them as they direct their own informal learning process. Various arguments on the adult learning process are roughly divided into multiple lenses for viewing and analysing the learning process. In this article, two epistemological points of view on the adult learning process are highlighted. For some people, learning can be acquisition activities. The ‘*learning as acquisition*’ lens “understands knowledge as a substantive thing – a skill or competency, concept, new language, habit, expertise, or wisdom – that an individual obtains through learning experiences” (Fenwick and Tennant, 2004, p.2). Through this lens, learners view learning as the “addition of knowledge, the improvement of skills and the development of values that expand and strengthen existing knowledge, skills and values” (p.2).

On the other hand, learning is a reflection process for other learners. The ‘*Learning as reflection*’ lens interprets learning as a meaning-making process. Fenwick and Tennant (2004, p.2) define this perspective on adult learning as helping learners to be active constructors of knowledge, “creating new meanings and realities rather than ingesting pre-existing knowledge”. This kind of learning often brings transformative outcomes that can lead us to challenge our assumptions and values and radically change our existing prior knowledge and approaches (Mezirow, 1991; Schugurensky, 2000). In the adult learning literature, this view of the learning process is embedded in the writings of scholars who appreciate the meaning and value of people’s life experiences (Kolb, 1984; Jarvis, 1987). According to Kolb (1984), not all adults learn from their life experiences. Learning does happen when learners actively make sense of an experience and links it to previous learning through reflection and integration of prior learning.

The different views on the process of adult informal learning can be meaningfully related to the nature of various activities that people conduct daily owing to the learner-centred focus of informal learning, which defines learners as the agents who influence their learning activities, from the inception of planning, through the actual process, to the final outcomes.

2.3 Learning in online communities

The previously mentioned characteristics of informal learning in terms of form, agency, context and process can be linked to the activities in proliferating online communities as an important *context* in which adult informal learning occurs. In this article, online communities are considered to be a potential context in which informal learning can occur through social activities and communication.

In the 21st century, many people engage in various activities on the internet. According to Imel (2003, p.3), the internet provides “access to information, encourages meaningful interaction with information or material, and brings people together”. Online communities use internet technology to make it possible for people to interact and communicate from a distance, regardless of time (Johnson, 2001). Many people participate in online communities as one of the key ways to acquire information and relate to others and their knowledge and experiences. Thus the online space has been generally adopted in contemporary society. Therefore, more adult educators now take online contexts seriously as settings of informal learning that will fit into people’s busy daily routines (Imel, 2003; Tough, 2002).

Currently, scholars in adult education support the nature of technology-facilitated interactions and the possibility of using technology in facilitating learning for adults (Cahoon, 1998; Brown, 2001; Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Tough, 2002; Mason, 2006). In relation to use of the internet for such learning, many studies have been conducted regarding distance education (Lindner and Murphy, 2001), e-mail discussion groups (Owen *et al.*, 1998) and web-based conferencing (Milton *et al.*, 1999). The studies show that these tools help enable group learning activities, whether the students participate in face-to-face sessions or are geographically dispersed (Cahoon, 1998). Most studies of adult learning and technology have somehow been limited to the uses of technology in formal and nonformal learning situations, such as structured web-assisted education. Online communities such as Cyworld have been merely regarded as an unstructured space for everyday interaction. The current explosion of online communities indeed requires more study on the nature of online community activities and their relation to adult informal learning.

Much remains to be explored in terms of the nature of such activities and their link to informal learning. For example, what can be learned through observing the interactions in this virtual space? And how is that process driven by adults who have disparate values, norms and attitudes? Based on these inquiries, this study links the extensiveness of informal learning in adult lives, learners as a prime agency of everyday interactions, and online communities to provide a new context of meaningful learning outside the more traditional and accepted formal and nonformal settings.

3 Methodology of the research

Owing to the complex nature of this inquiry, the study adopted a ‘*mixed model research*’ (Johnson and Christensen, 2004), which is where “the researcher mixes both qualitative and quantitative research approaches within a stage of the study or across two of the stages of the research process”. That is to say, the survey was conducted using online questionnaires, which included not only closed items (*i.e.*, quantitative), but also open items (*i.e.*, qualitative) (Johnson and Christensen, 2004). The data was obtained

from 100 participants through an online survey, and were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The data collection and analysis for this study proceeded as follows.

3.1 *Participants in this study*

The target participants recruited for this study were adult Cyworld users over 20 years of age (*i.e.*, the year of birth being earlier than 1986). There were two criteria for exclusion of the recruited participants:

- 1 users who were students, that is, enrolled in any formal education programme (*e.g.*, college, university, graduate school) because of this study's focus on informal learning, and the possibility that students could use Cyworld in support of their formal education
- 2 users who resided outside of Korea, under the assumption that international residents might have different motivations for using Cyworld.

To recruit the participants, the strategy of snowball sampling was used. Each researcher initially invited personal acquaintances that fit the criteria for participation and asked them to introduce other Cyworld users among their acquaintances to increase the response rate and secure quality responses. Throughout this procedure, age distribution and gender balance was intentionally considered to obtain the most diverse voices using Cyworld.

3.2 *Data collection*

Data were gathered through an online survey written in Korean. A total of 123 users accepted the invitation and voluntarily accessed the online survey, and 100 respondents completed the survey questionnaire. The survey questions were generally grouped into three categories: demographic background, personal experiences with Cyworld, and personal perception of learning in general and specifically in relation to Cyworld. Each participant received an acorn honorarium, which is a unit of cyber money in Cyworld. Data collected was then translated into English by the researchers for data analysis.

Out of the 100 participants, the majority were female (67%), 30–39 years old (52%) and office workers (51%). Half of the participants had used mini-hompi for more than 2 years (50%), another half had used that feature for 1–4 hours per week (51%), and 45% had less than 5 *Ilchons* (or neighbours). Of the participants, 74% used additional online communities: *i.e.*, other blogs or a specific interest group called an online club or an online café. The detailed demographics are presented in Table 1.

3.3 *Data analysis*

The data were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the quantitative approach, any feasible correlation was measured, using the SPSS programme to determine whether there was any correlation among the variables (*e.g.*, gender, age, occupation, years of experience, and their perception of the relation between learning experiences and Cyworld activities).

Table 1 Demographics of the survey participants

| <i>Category</i> | <i>Items</i> | <i>Number of responses</i> |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Gender | Female | 67 |
| | Male | 33 |
| Age | 20–29 | 44 |
| | 30–39 | 52 |
| | Over 40 | 4 |
| Occupation | Office workers | 51 |
| | Self-employed | 5 |
| | Professional | 21 |
| | Job seekers | 6 |
| | Full-time housewives | 10 |
| | Other | 7 |
| Years of experience | 0–1 yrs | 11 |
| | 1 yrs–2 yrs | 39 |
| | More than 2 yrs | 50 |
| Hourly use merged | Less than 1 hr | 17 |
| | 1–2 hrs | 28 |
| | 3–4 hrs | 23 |
| | 5–6 hrs | 10 |
| | More than 7 hrs | 22 |
| | Number of Ilchons (neighbours) | Less than 5 |
| | 5–9 | 26 |
| | 10–19 | 14 |
| | 20–29 | 5 |
| | 30–39 | 5 |
| | More than 40 | 5 |
| Use of other online communities | YES | 74 |
| | NO | 26 |

In addition to the statistical analytical approaches among the variables, the data obtained from the open-ended survey questions were also qualitatively analysed using an open coding microanalysis method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to explore the relationships laid out in the broad research questions and to obtain a fruitful description and interpretation of the complex phenomena present within Cyworld. That is to say, the responses to some open-ended questions regarding:

- the reasons for using mini-hompi
- mini-hompi-related activities as informal learning experiences
- the personal definitions of learning were coded according to the coding scheme developed for this study, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Coding scheme for data analysis

| <i>Category</i> | <i>Codes</i> |
|--|---|
| Reasons to engage using mini-hompi | For interpersonal relationship For self-reflection For observation of other lives |
| Informal learning experiences in mini-hompi-related activities | Self-reflecting Sustaining social bonding Acquiring specific knowledge Cultivating a constructive life |
| Definition of learning | Learning as reflection Learning as acquisition |

4 Findings of the research

4.1 Results from quantitative analysis

Among all of the demographic background information in the study, no statistically significant correlation was found except for one. Average hours using mini-hompi and years of mini-hompi experience were nearly significantly correlated ($p = .061$ at the significant level of .05). That is, Cyworld users who had longer Cyworld experiences tended to spend relatively more hours on Cyworld activities each week.

4.2 Major findings

It was the principally descriptive data analysis which revealed three major findings that answered the research questions:

- 1 major motivations for participants to engage in the use of mini-hompi
- 2 experiences of informal learning in mini-hompi-related activities
- 3 participants' definition of learning and their perception of mini-hompi activities as a sequence.

The data analysis showed that once the participants joined mini-hompi activities with a certain motivation, many of them, if not all, had certain learning experiences. But their perception of mini-hompi activities appeared to be affected by their definition of learning.

4.2.1 Motivations for engaging in online community activities

The participants joined and continue to be involved in mini-hompi activities using mini-hompi as a channel to develop social relationships and express themselves to others. Table 3 presents the results of the survey regarding the tools used most frequently in the mini-hompi and the reasons participants had for interacting with others with mini-hompi.

Table 3 The tools used most frequently and the reasons for interacting with others with mini-hompi

| <i>Questions</i> | <i>Number</i> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| Tools used most frequently* | |
| Photo album | 90 |
| Diary | 14 |
| Bulletin board | 9 |
| Guest book | 68 |
| Juke box | 9 |
| Others | 3 |
| Reasons to engage with mini-hompi* | |
| Maintain social relationships | 86 |
| Develop interpersonal communication | 46 |
| Self-expression and self-reflection | 40 |
| Observing others' lives | 25 |
| Sharing information | 19 |
| Others | 5 |

Note: *Multiple choices were available to participants.

Their specific purposes were as follows:

First, mini-hompi activities cultivate and maintain interpersonal relationships (132 responses), which include maintaining social relationships at the casual level and developing interpersonal communication at the serious level when sharing thoughts, opinions and emotions. Student participant #21 said:

“It can easily express my interest and concern to acquaintances and even if I don’t see a person face-to-face for a while, it still gives us a sense to stay in touch with each other.”

Second, as quoted below from participant #9, below, the mini-hompi provides a space to reflect thoughts, feelings and experiences (40 responses):

“I make extra efforts to look better to friends who don’t see me often and this conscious effort actually blows a new energy into my life.”

Next, the quote from participant #47 below shows that mini-hompi also offers participants the opportunity to observe other people’s lives (25 responses):

“I am very glad to locate friends whom I lost contact with. I visit their hompi more frequently than a phone and glimpse their daily moments. It helps that we keep building up a rapport.”

Along with these intentions, a photo album and a guest book were the most favoured features for users. A guest book was primarily used for maintaining social relationships at the casual level. For instance, 68 respondents preferred to use Cyworld’s guest book feature to using a regular phone or e-mail to drop off a brief hello message. Participant #11 expressed:

“Especially the guest book is very convenient and easy to drop off hello.”

A diary or bulletin board was pursued by more meaning-oriented users for sharing experiences and thoughts. A photo album was the most popular feature, regardless of its specific intention. In essence, participants found the mini-hompi a ‘catalyst’ of active human relationships for sharing their thoughts, feelings, know-how, life skills and everyday experiences. Participant #21 said:

“It has helped me get over depression through and after giving a birth and childcare. It opens a new gate to communicate with friends and family, I feel like I get my life back.”

Interestingly, no participant thought that ‘sharing a specific information/skill’ was a factor influencing their lives or was a main force for staying in Cyworld activities. This phenomenon can attest that mini-hompi is seen and utilised the most as a communication tool on Cyworld.

4.2.2 Experiences of learning in mini-hompi-related activities

The findings discussed in the previous section are remarkable in that informal learning was widely practised while participants engaged in mini-hompi activities. However, how did the participants themselves conceive of these activities? Table 4 summarises the participants’ responses to the survey question on the relationship between mini-hompi activities and learning and the reasons for that relationship.

Table 4 Experiences of learning and the reasons for participant responses

| <i>Question</i> | <i>Response</i> | <i>No.</i> | <i>Reasons for the response</i> |
|---|-----------------|------------|--|
| Do participants see mini-hompi activities as related to learning? | Yes | 62 | Self-reflection Sustaining social bonding Acquiring specific knowledge Cultivating a constructive life |
| | No | 38 | Only for maintaining relationships Not for seeking tangible information Merely for fun Showing myself to others |

When the participants were asked to link the meaning they gained to learning, 62 respondents indicated that learning did happen through these activities. The other 38 respondents believed that any learning through online use could only happen through sharing a tangible piece of information and specific content-oriented knowledge. Specifically, 62% of participants believed that even if they did not intend to pursue any learning-related experiences, mini-hompi activities did lead them to such positive experiences as reflecting on themselves; sustaining social bonding; acquiring specific knowledge, information and skills; and, in turn, cultivating a constructive life.

Participants #92 and #65 said, respectively:

“Using a guest book or a place for writing is good for us to share our lives that we hardly could do before. I think that these in-direct experiences and understanding accumulated by communication are learning.”

“Observing other people’s mini-hompis, I learn how to live, how others live, how to deal with others, what others think on a particular subject, and why they think differently from me.”

The participants found information or thoughts posted by their neighbours (Ilchons) more influential and trustful than ones posted by strangers. One participant said that her neighbours appeared to perceive their experiences with mini-hompi as very valuable.

The other 38 participants reported that they did not find any mini-hompi-related activities to be learning experiences because they viewed the activities as being used simply for maintaining casual relationships. Participant #33 expressed the following thoughts:

“It is easy to see a mini-hompi as an effective tool to manage a network but it is also very superficial, casual and weightless, I think. Saying hello through a guest book is also an expression for care but that is it. Personally, I think it (the relationship) does not go deep but stops right there. I don’t think I reorganize my thoughts or reproduce something through this mini-hompi. No matter how many references or information you pick up and store in your site, if you did it without any reflective process, they cannot be yours. They need a process to be internalized.”

Next, participant #40 expressed the following, indicating that the use of Cyworld was not aimed at seeking tangible information:

“It has nothing to do with learning directly because I don’t pursue anything to learn in Cyworld.”

Meanwhile, reflecting ‘merely for fun’, a representative #78 commented as follows:

“As I visit mini-hompi just for fun, I have no chances for reflection.”

Finally, for ‘showing myself’, participant #82 said:

“Rather than knowing something that I did not know before, its role is for showing myself.”

For those users who perceived that activities in mini-hompi were not related to any learning, the Cyworld activities were far from any meaning-making experiences. A study participant even mentioned that she would not lose anything meaningful even if she stopped engaging with mini-hompi immediately.

4.2.3 Participants’ definition of learning and perception of online community activities

What creates the difference between the participants’ responses about learning? One’s definition of learning, as discussed in the earlier section, can in fact vary from others, depending on his or her individual and personal perspectives. This aspect was true for the participants of this study.

As presented in Table 5, more than half of the study participants (65%) defined learning as an acquisition process (particularly knowledge acquisition and its application) while 32 participants defined learning in a broader sense as a reflective process (meaning making). The participants’ different perceptions of learning showed their distinct perspectives when defining mini-hompi-related activities.

Table 5 Definition of learning and perspectives of those mini-hompi activities

| <i>Do participants see mini-hompi activities as related to learning?</i> | <i>No.</i> | <i>How do participants define learning?</i> | <i>No.</i> |
|--|------------|---|------------|
| YES | 61 | Learning as acquisition | 36 (59%) |
| | (1)* | Learning as reflection | 25 (41%) |
| NO | 36 | Learning as acquisition | 29 (81%) |
| | (2)* | Learning as reflection | 7 (19%) |

Note: *Three participants did not answer the question asking for a definition of learning.

The study findings suggest that four different groups can be categorised based on the link between the participants' perception of learning and their perspective when defining mini-hompi-related activities.

The first group (36 participants) believed that learning occurred in their mini-hompi activities and learning meant 'the acquisition of specific knowledge, skills or information'. The participants in this group brought up specific facts-focused information, for example, cooking recipes, travel information, or a skill in photography that they obtained through their neighbours' hompis, to explain and define their meaningful learning experiences. Participant #24 stated:

"I gained a new recipe from a friend's site, read various critics of a specific book, and learned a new song recommended by another friend."

The second group (25 participants) that included mini-hompi activities as part of meaning-making experiences defined learning more broadly than the first group, including experiencing a reflective process and/or meaning-making experience. As an example, participant #45 said:

"The friends' thoughts and experiences exposed by their journals led me to have interests on the issues I did not before."

The third group (29 participants) did not think that any learning-related activities occur in their Cyworld activities and defined learning simply as 'the acquisition of specific knowledge, skills, or information'. Participants #67 and #70 respectively said:

"It does not have something to do with learning because I don't use Cyworld for something to learn but use it only for staying in touch with friends."

"The value of information in there is quite cheap and much of information is very personal."

The last group (7 participants) did not view mini-hompi activities as meaning-making experiences, but did accept the broader definition of learning as consisting of a reflective process. Participants #84 and #5 expressed this view the same way as the second group had:

"Learning happens when one finally realizes something after pursuing it. Learning usually happens after an attempt to satisfy his or her own desire for knowing. But, one usually takes note of her or his experiences in mini-hompi and that is it."

"Mini-hompi simply exists as a mean for human relationships so it is far away from what I consider as learning."

It is acknowledged that these two aspects, namely the definition of learning and the perception of mini-hompi activities, were asked separately of the participants, so participants did not necessarily associate the two aspects as related, but rather considered them separately.

5 Discussion

Internet Technology (IT) is not only a tool for communication, but also offers a meaningful context for reconstructing one's life, especially for those adults who seek a life-long learning opportunity outside of a formal school environment. IT in a pedagogical context thus finds its role as being significant in a social and/or societal context. In this sense, the Korean online community Cyworld appears to offer a meaningful context as an online space to facilitate informal learning. Most of the users believe that they have meaningful experiences in Cyworld. Specifically, the study results found, first of all, that Cyworld users utilise the online space to share their own experiences and thoughts. Second, as users appeared to trust the information or knowledge posted by their neighbours (significant others) more than the information posted by strangers, they came to understand and agree more easily with their neighbours (Ilchons)' opinions/thoughts and to apply the specific techniques derived from these opinions to their own lives. These experiences in turn become more influential to them. Third, users also had an opportunity to reflect on their lives through observing the lives of others and comparing those life experiences with their own.

Adult learners place themselves at the centre for pursuing learning and prefer to control all matters of learning. Informal learning that occurs in a real-life context should hence not be underestimated, but more emphasised. In this sense, it is not very surprising that the majority of adults (29 out of 36) who did not find mini-hompi activities meaningful defined learning as facts-focused acquisition. Only seven participants (19%) did not think that any learning happened in their mini-hompi activities even though they showed a broader perception of learning. The authors' conjecture here is that these seven participants might not have had a chance to internalise their own experiences and that this finding could lead to another study on whether this phenomenon can be related to tacit learning. Regardless of how users defined learning, about two-thirds of the participants (63%) believed that their activities in mini-hompi somehow did lead to constructive experiences. More interestingly, users who emphasised the meaning-making process for learning showed a stronger voice, agreeing that mini-hompi activities were indeed learning related. In addition, this research and study brings forth the question about what makes users perceive the meaning of mini-hompi activities differently. What is the main reason that certain people never find these activities momentous, but only entertaining? This study suggests that how an individual perceives the nature of learning can be one factor, but that explanation alone is not fully convincing. Subsequent studies may be necessary to identify what makes users formulate such different perspectives.

Even if these findings are remarkable, suggesting that an online community may act as a new type of learning environment, the results are still limited since the study focused on a specific online community in a particular region, South Korea. If an identical study is conducted in other cultural regions, its results might point to a different direction.

There were some other limitations in this study as well. First, regardless of its particular target population, it is still hard to generalise the results in part because of the small sample size compared to the total number of users in Cyworld. The study results can still be consequential in that they provide a sketch of the users' diverse activities. Second, the study did not fully capture each individual user's own deep and vivid description about the online experiences, as the study employed only a written survey questionnaire for data collection. Further elaborative qualitative research methodologies might be needed for any subsequent study to be more revealing.

6 Conclusion

South Korea's online community Cyworld has showed a huge influence on Korean's use of IT Online communication, in particular, takes up a significant part of many Koreans' lives as well.

While a growing number of people make use of personal web publishing and weblogs to support their own learning successfully, these people also exhibit remarkable skills for the initiation and maintenance of personally meaningful learning (Efimova and Fiedler, 2004). Cyworld's personal-relationship-oriented fun features seem to nurture similar 'personally meaningful learning' in that the users construct their own meaning-making activities while they are communicating with others, sharing their experiences, information and knowledge, and thus creating and strengthening their social networks on this online context. In conclusion, Cyworld possesses a potential possibility to be expanded as an informal learning network to support informal adult learning.

Therefore, this study adds to current knowledge the new insights that this type of online community can be used to enhance users' learning and that users' own definition of learning is very important in expanding their learning experiences.

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Notes

- 1 <http://www.cyworld.com>
- 2 <http://www.myspace.com>