

Online writing communities: Adolescents' perspective on learning



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Abstract

With a growing amount of adolescents being active daily online, there has also been an increasing interest within this field. The current study aimed to fill the literature gap in online writing communities, such as Sweek and Wattpad, and how adolescents learn and interact within these communities. For this exploratory study the perspectives, ideas and aspirations of 18 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 21 were gathered through semi-structured interviews, online survey and observations. The qualitative results show learning online is different than learning at school but that these two spaces should not be seen as opposites. At school adolescents can feel restricted through a set curriculum and a tight schedule but develop basic skills and gain important knowledge. Online writing communities on the other hand, offers adolescents a space where they can further explore and invest in their own interests. Therefore, school remains important offering adolescents basic skills while on Wattpad and Sweek they can further develop these and other skills.

Keywords: Online writing communities, learning, adolescents, self-development, Sweek, Wattpad

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Netflix's latest hit *The Kissing Booth* was first published as a story on Wattpad.com and is one of the first, in what is sure to be, a long list of Wattpad to movie adaptations (Tartaglione, 2016). Short story and novel writers have produced massive amounts of self-written works for online consumption (Campbell et al., 2016). Online writing communities, such as Wattpad and Sweek, have formed a space where writers of varying ages and skills can interact together. More than 65 million people are members of the Wattpad community, some as young as 13 ("Wattpad", n.d.). Furthermore, research shows that 80% of Dutch adolescents between 15 and 19 years of age are actively online daily (Van der Veer, Boeke, & Peters, 2017). While plenty of research has been done on the negative effects of social media use among adolescents, this study will focus on the positive effects (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014; Pujazon-Zazik & Park, 2010). For example, how members of these online communities connect and interact with each other and share their opinions, knowledge and build friendships (Chiu, Hso, & Wang, 2006). These interactions allow development of creativity, a sense of belonging and an individual identity (Ito et al., 2010). Past research has described these communities and their members but very little research has taken the perspectives of adolescents into account and what they feel they learn online (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015). This study will look at Wattpad and Sweek through the eyes of adolescents, as well as at the informal learning features of these communities and adolescent's views on learning.

Informal learning is any type of learning that happens outside of the classroom or a structured setting. This can mean learning through self-direction or personal experience; where learning is something spontaneous and experimental (Sefton-Green, 2003; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). Thus, informal learning is different from education by way of its unsystematic process of transforming everyday experience into knowledge or skills (Tu & Corry, 2002). It is also more focused on the process of learning rather than the outcome of learning. In school students must actively participate in classroom activities whether they have the needed skills or not (Hanson-Smith, 2013). The curriculum rather than the student determines when the student is ready to start a new task. Engaging in informal learning gives a student more control over their own learning process (Ito et al., 2010). Thus, when adolescents take part in the online writing community they are choosing to learn more about the subjects that they became interested in offline. In return, adolescents are then given a limitless space where they can explore their identity. This is a process of disembodiment or the separation of a person's online identity from their offline identity, a

condition associated with anonymity and textuality. In other words, 'you are who you type' and who have all the freedom to choose who they want to be online (Slater, 2002). Thus, online communities are places of informal learning where writers with shared beliefs and interests, can come together and communicate, practice, react and participate with other writers (Ito et al., 2010).

Writers that join online writing communities share the same interests. They can choose their own topic of interest on Wattpad and Sweek, meaning that within the communities they can further specify their interest ("Wattpad", n.d.; "Sweek", n.d.). Members share their own stories, read others' stories, communicate with each other, give and ask others for feedback, and build their own network (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Hellekson, 2015; Phang, Kankanhalli, & Sabherwal, 2009). Wattpad or Sweek can therefore become spaces, other than school, where adolescents can come together to practice a skill they are all interested in. Gee (2005) calls this an affinity space and based it on Wenger's (1998) 'communities of practice'. However, here the focus is placed on how online communities can create a space in which members interact with one another, rather than just on membership in a community (Gee, 2005; Wenger, 1998).

Both Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development and Erikson's theory of psychosocial development support the idea of affinity spaces. Vygotsky's theory explains how members of a community interact and help each other to become more skilled (Vygotsky, 1978). During social interaction a skilled 'instructor' will help to assist and support the less skilled pupil until they can perform the task independently (Holden, 2010). Within affinity spaces there is no distinction when it comes to those who are skilled and those that are rookies. Everyone uses the same space to share content and to interact with each other and alternating between the roles of student and teacher. Erikson states that having the opportunity to switch between these roles is favorable for adolescents as they are still experimenting with their identity (Erikson, 1972; Feldman, 2015). Adolescents get the chance to explore and develop skills attached to these roles, such as teaching others and dealing with feedback, without having to take on a fixed role. Within a writing community peer feedback allows members to interact and provide comments on each other members' writing, which in turn creates a space for communication, discussion and learning. Thus, a space where meaningful interactions take place and a member's level of knowledge can be extended (Lin & Yang, 2011).

Interactions such as these can be seen between adolescents that are intensely committed and highly skilled in the activity of their online community (Ito et al., 2010). This type of online participation is called 'geeking-out'. The term 'geek' may imply a negative

connotation; however, it is used here to expand the ideas of what it means to be a geek. Geeks are not simply socially awkward and overly obsessed, they are also experts in their field of interest (Cross, 2005). This interest-driven community of adolescents is using its skills to push the boundaries of restrictions and social norms and broaden their visions of self and the world (Ito et al., 2010; Landt, 2006). Korobkova (2014) describes Wattpad as a positive space that is filled with “young people developing literacy practices, literate identities and relationships to print, visual and musical texts”. However, students were less motivated in writing assignment given by school (Korobkova, 2014). Motivation is higher within their online community because it is interest-driven (Gelman, Beckley, Johri, Domeniconi, & Yang, 2016). Therefore, it is important to find out what inspires adolescents to write and actively participate in an online community, and also what their aspirations are.

As online communities like Wattpad and Sweek gain popularity among teenagers they challenge the traditional ideas of learning. This study offers a more in-depth view of what and how adolescents between the ages 14 and 21 learn within online writing communities and what this means for their development. With a special focus on adolescents’ perspectives this study will be focusing on the following questions: How does learning on Wattpad/Sweek differ from school? How do adolescents communicate with other members of the community and what impact does this have on their identity? Lastly, what is the added value of engaging in online writing communities when it comes to traditional educational ideas? Finally aiming to answer the main question of the current research: What are the narratives and opinions of young people of learning and self-formation, both inside and outside of school?

Method

Design

The research topic was processed in a qualitative design with use of triangulation and was categorized as an exploratory study (Boeije, 2010). A qualitative design was chosen due to the focus on the narratives of the adolescents. Using semi-structured interviews and an online survey, it was aimed to get a more in-depth view of their aspirations and thoughts on learning. Subsequently, the project had a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). As the data was collected the researchers aimed to confirm, deepen or expand the information collected for further understanding of the topic.

Participants

The study consisted of 18 participants in total ($N = 18$). 6 out of the 18 participants were interviewed by both or at least one of the authors, and the other 12 participants took part in the online survey. Participants were between the ages of 14 and 21. On average,

participants were a member of an online writing site for 3,5 years. There was initially a total of 18 participants that took part in the online survey. However, because 75% of the questions not answered by six participants these were not included in the data analysis. There were only two male participants in this study.

The participants were approached online through private messages on Wattpad.com and on Sweek.com. Two Facebook groups especially created for members of these two online writing communities were also approached. A message was sent to each possible participant asking for their participation in the study, along with information about the topic of the study and informed consent. Participants must have been active within their online writing community in the past month. Active here is defined as having read, written, reacted or communicated with others within their online community of preference. A full anonymous overview of the participants' background information is available in Appendix A.

Due to the limited time available to conduct this inquiry the sample size is not sufficient to understand the population. However, it offers an interesting insight in this online community and the participants' thoughts and aspirations. How the obtained information could be practical for future research, will be further explained in the discussion.

Formulation of research framework

Prior to data collection, literature about online communities, fandoms, informal learning and learning theory were gathered. Search engines, Google Scholar and PsycInfo, provided numerous articles about these subjects. To narrow down the number of articles the following keywords were used: online community, virtual community, informal learning, adolescents/youth, Vygotsky, learning space, and affinity space. All articles found were used in the introduction section and formed the theoretical framework of this study.

Interview questions were formulated for the topic list (Appendix B) and divided into 3 parts. Part 1 focused on the participants background information. Part 2 focused on their online community participation. Part 3 focused on their thoughts on learning in school and learning in general. Secondly, the online survey (Appendix C) was derived from the semi-structured interview questions. The questions were slightly adapted, due to none of the authors being present while completing the survey in case of misunderstandings. During both the interview and the survey special attention was given to participants' reason to join these communities, their thoughts and ideas on learning (online and offline) and their future aspirations.

Procedure

Four interviews took place in a private room at the University Library, one interview took place online, using Skype, and the last one took place at the participants favorite café. Each interview was under an hour long, however there was no time limit set. During three of the six interviews there was only one researcher present. During the other three both researchers were present: one lead the interview and the other one took notes on body language and provided additional commentary when needed. Right before the recording started, the researchers made sure the participants felt comfortable by holding an informal conversation. During this conversation the participants were also informed that they had the right to stop the interview at any time, that their anonymity would be guaranteed and were reminded that the interview was being recorded. Participants were also informed that if they did not wish to proceed with the interview, the recording would be immediately stopped, and the data destroyed. All of this was repeated to the participants once the recording starts so that they can give informed consent on record. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked if they were interested in the results and were thanked for their time and effort. Participants were also asked if they knew other members within the online community that would like to participate in the research project.

Analysis

Prior to analysis, each author transcribed three of the held interviews. Secondly, each author coded all six interviews by hand and on their own, so that both were well informed of the data collected. After the individual coding took place a total of 168 open codes were found. To reduce the amount of open codes the authors came together to discuss their open codes. During this discussion different codes were merged into one open code, and others were replaced by a new one due to their ambiguous meaning. After agreeing on the open codes, which were 55 in the end, the process of axial coding began. The researchers categorized the open codes and subsequently searched for one umbrella term which then became the axial code. This whole process of open codes and axial codes was done three times before the authors reached the ultimate code tree. The authors then debated on which selective coding could represent the analyzed information. Both researchers were not members of an online community which meant that neither participant was better informed about the topic.

Ethics

A total of five out of the 18 participants was under the age of 18 and were required to have informed consent from their parents. Due to the nature of the survey being online

and anonymous, informed consent could not be firmly established here. However, the amount of ethical concern is small as the interview questions did not pose any serious mental or physical harm to the participants. The informed consent letter can be found in Appendix D. It is important to mention that this study was for a school thesis project. Meaning that ultimately it was geared towards the benefit of the student researchers rather than the sample population.

Results

A total of 55 open codes were used and these were subsequently split into 6 axial codes. For further understanding there will be an explanation of every axial code and these will be supported by quotes of participants. Table 1 gives an overview of how frequently the axial codes were recorded throughout the data. In Appendix E there is a full overview of the open codes together with the axial codes.

It is also important to mention that when using quotes, participants will be appointed with a letter and a number. The letter I indicates that this is a participant that was interviewed, and the letter S indicates that this is a participant that completed the survey.

Table 1: *Frequency percentage of axial codes*

Axial codes	Percentages (%)
Feedback	9.9
Self-development	28.5
Success	21.6
Communication Community	14.3
Anonymity	10.1
Learning everywhere	15.6

Feedback

The code 'Feedback' was chosen to show all the ways participants give, receive and evaluate feedback on stories. Feedback can come from members of their online community, teachers at school or friends and family. From the 12 survey participants, ten mentioned some form of feedback. This axial code, consisting of ten open codes, refers to feedback participants receive and/or give on the stories they write or read. This can happen online but also offline. Some of the open codes that make up this axial code are: 'receives

feedback on grammar and spelling', 'gives feedback on story', 'participant uses feedback', 'low quality feedback' and 'high-quality feedback' among others.

When I5 was asked what kind of feedback they preferred the response was: *"...beetje op het niveau van 'dit komt niet goed over' of 'Ik zou het iets anders doen' of 'dit woordvolgorde klopt niet', dat soort dingen. En hulp met het opbouwen van het plot"*. Feedback was also given and received on spelling and grammar. However, this was coded less frequently than feedback given or received on story. Most feedback was received publicly, via the comments section, rather than via a private message. 12 of the 18 participants laid a heavy importance on the quality of the feedback. If they felt that the feedback was not good or not justified, then they would not use it. An example of this is when I6 said: *"...meestal zijn het van 12 jarige die dan uhhhh die zeggen heel veel en die geven niet echt feedback maar zijn meer van 'Oh mijn god' 'Yay!' 'Leuk', dat soort zoi....Qua schrijven heb je er waarschijnlijk niet veel aan maar het is wel grappig om te lezen maar niet heel erg handig of zo"*.

In contrast to the positive reactions of the participants above, participant I3 said the following when asked what she does when she receives feedback on her stories: *"Maar als mensen inhoudelijk iets hebben dat ze niet eens zijn met het verhaallijn, hoe het gaat of zo, daar heb ik zo iets van het is mijn verhaal, dus ga eens zelf maar een andere versie schrijven"*. It is important to mention that participant I3 is the only participant out of the 18 that gave a negative reaction when it comes to feedback.

Only I1 mentioned a difference in the type of feedback received online and at school: *"Nee, ik denk dat uni juist heel goed is met feedback. Want ik had niet verwacht dat je zoveel zou worden ondersteund in het schrijven van dingen. Er is altijd minstens een feedback ronde van medestudenten, van je docent"*. This participant made it clear that feedback was always given on school assignments.

Results from the questionnaire showed less importance in receiving feedback. Only half of these participants used the feedback they had received and only five gave feedback in return. S9 stated: *"Prima, meestal wel goede reacties. Zo niet gebruik ik het als leerpunt of negeer ik het als het toch niet belangrijk is"*.

Self-development

The data analysis shows that this axial code was the most recurring topic among participants. Self-development consists of eleven open codes and refers to all types of growth the participants experienced online and offline. Within the gathered data of each participant, three or more of the eleven open codes were used. Some of the open codes were: 'school limits creativity', 'reason membership', 'developing writing skills', and 'feeling

writing gives'. The open code 'reason membership', coded in the data of fifteen of the eighteen participants, illustrates how participants indicate that they joined the online community at first just to read and it easily became a source to develop different skills. To illustrate this, participant I1 said: "[...] *het was niet in eerste instantie dat ik op kwam om te schrijven, maar vrij snel daarna ben ik wel ook gaan schrijven [...] ik ben zelf dyslectisch en door het schrijven ben ik wel echt beter geworden in mijn spelling en dan voelt het echt leuk om als dyslect spellingsfouten, zegmaar dat ik aan de andere kant sta*". Thus showing, that through online writing activities adolescents were able to improve their writing and reading skills. On the other hand, there are also participants that were explicitly searching for a place to explore their talents. S2 said the following: "*Na de examenperiode van mijn havo had ik vrije tijd en wilde ik iets doen met het talent waarvan mensen beweren dat ik het in me had*". These two quotes show that adolescents are easily motivated to develop new skills.

Also the open code 'school limits creativity' made an appearance in the data of fifteen participants. These participants expressed their discontent with the little space available at school to invest in their own interests. Participant S3 stated: "[...] *het mag wat flexibeler. Er mag wel meer aandacht gegeven worden aan wat een kind al kan en ook dat gebruiken. Ook al is dat niet altijd binnen de lijntjes past*". Which is the reason why these adolescents make use of the online writing community, stating under the open code "developing writing skills" participant I5 said: "[...] *als je iets wil leren dat je niet op school leert dat moet je heel erg bezig zijn met een hobby of iets dergelijks. Bij mij was het gewoon door Wattpad en zo door te schrijven en te lezen leer je gewoon veel beter Nederlands en grammatica en dat soort dingen*".

Success

This axial code refers to the different perspectives participants had on the word 'success'. This includes how they think about it and how they think you can achieve it online and at school. This axial code is composed by nine open codes from which 'Wattpad/Sweek success' and 'school success' are an example of. Some of the participants stated that school success consists of getting good grades and finishing school or as participant I2 said: "*Op school vind ik het genoeg als ik steeds over ga zeg maar. Ik ben best wel van het voldoende is voldoende. Dat is voor mij succesvol*" or as S11 said, "*als iemand geslaagd is en zijn best heeft gedaan*". This meaning that the end-product, passing to the next grade or graduating, was the most important factor in the definition of success. However, some participants also added that school success did not just depend on the end product. Being happy, doing your

best, getting something out of what you learn and making friends all contributed to doing well in school. Participant I4 can illustrate this best with the following statement: *"Als je dingen leert wat je later wat aan hebt voor de toekomst die je graag zelf dan wil. En nou ja, het hangt deels wel samen met punten, maar ik vind punten niet het allerbelangrijkste"*.

In contrast to school success, online success was defined as the journey the adolescents took. For them to be successful within their online community they should not always be the best. Participant I2, explained how success within the Wattpad community could be reached: *"Op Wattpad denk ik gewoon actief zijn en blijven schrijven, dat vind ik het belangrijkste. Heel veel mensen zijn gelijk al als ze niet meteen heel veel lezers hebben dat ze dan al stoppen met schrijven. Je moet juist door blijven gaan en veel tekst gebruiken zodat mensen je verhalen wat makkelijker vinden"*. Thus, to reach success within the online community one should be an active member and take the time to grow. Fifteen of the 18 participants also believed that to be successful on Wattpad or Sweek they needed a lot of followers and readers, I1: *"Ja, je kan natuurlijk kijken naar volgers. Je kan kijken naar het aantal lezers, je kan kijken naar het aantal stemmen op een verhaal"*. The same participant stated later in the interview: *"Natuurlijk is het leuk om te zien dat je zoveel lezers hebt, maar daar hecht ik mijn succes waarde niet aan"*. Thus, illustrating that the number of followers or readers were not directly linked to online success. However, this contradiction was later explained by participant I4: *"Per definitie is succesvol natuurlijk als er zo veel mogelijk mensen je verhaal lezen [...] vooral doordat ik feedback wil"*. Meaning that the number of followers is appreciated but receiving high quality feedback is much more desired.

Community Communication

'Community communication' refers to the way participants feel and think about their online community and the activities they engage in online. This axial code consists of ten open codes. 'Feeling of community', 'unwritten community rules' and 'virtual friends' are the three biggest open codes within this axial code. When asked if they felt like a community, participant S6 wrote: *"Ja of course iedereen heeft op een of andere manier regels gemaakt bij Wattpad"*. Participant S9 even stated that: *"[...] er zijn gewoon enkele dingen die als not-done worden beschouwd"*. In addition, I1 mentioned that there is a community, but it is your own choice to what extent you invest in the community to. This participant also mentioned that virtual friends are not the same as offline friends: *"[...] ik denk niet dat het echt zo'n gemeenschap is als je vriendengroep op school of zo"*. I6 had a similar opinion on

virtual friends when asked if she had made any friends online, she said: *"Had ik ooit wel maar nu niet zo veel meer want ja de mensen gaan op een gegeven moment ook andere dingen doen dus dat is weggezakt, maar dat had ik ooit wel"*. In contrast to the short-term friendship participant I6 argues about, participant S8 wrote the following when asked if there is something she would like to share: *"[...] het geweldig is en dat je zo mensen vindt met dezelfde interesses en vrienden voor het leven kan maken"*. These quotes illustrate how participants experience their online activities. While some strongly believe that there is a community, others do less. While some are of opinion that only short-term friendships can be established, others believe in long-term friendships.

On the other hand, when participant I2 was asked if they made friends online she said: *"uhm nee, ik heb best snel mezelf afzonderlijk gehouden en niet bij een groep aangesloten"*. When asked why she felt or thought that way she answered: *"Ja voor mij is Wattpad meer iets dat nuttig was. Ik was eigenlijk al best wel tevreden met de vrienden die ik al had"*. Participant I2 chose to simply focus on a specific aspect the online writing community, which is getting feedback.

Anonymity

Anonymity was the least prominent topic within the data. This axial code, made up by six open codes, covers the way participants deal with others knowing of their participation in an online writing community. Seventeen out of the 18 participants said that others (e.g., parents or friends) were aware of their writing activities. However, none of these participants were explicitly open about writing online. Participant S10 illustrates this best saying: *"Mijn ouders weten dat wel [...] echte goede vrienden weten dat ik schrijven [...] het is niet zo dat ik sta te springen bij onbekenden en om luidkeels te roepen 'IK SCHRIJF!'"*. Another example is participant I5 that said the following when asked about who knew about her writing activities online: *"Dus er waren niet super veel vrienden die ervan af wisten, ze wisten wel dat ik schreef maar ze wisten niet per se dat ik op Wattpad zou posten. Toen had ik wel aan mijn ouders verteld, maar volgens mij hebben ze het nooit gelezen of zo. Ik ben ook best wel privé dus ik weet niet of ik het heel fijn had gevonden of ze het zou lezen"*. Thus, it seems that adolescents somehow prefer to preserve their anonymity even when they claim to be open about their activities.

Observation.

One important observation made during the recruit of participants was the difficulty to agree to a face-to-face interview with the researchers. One participant responded through the online private inbox of Wattpad: *"Ik zou graag deelgenomen hebben aan het interview, maar helaas is het onmogelijk om toestemming aan mijn ouders te vragen,*

aangezien ze niet op de hoogte zijn van het bestaan van Wattpad.com, laat staan van het feit dat ik het gebruik. :(". There were 16 others that had a similar reason not to participate. On the other hand, two interviewees recruited through the Facebook groups did not want to share their username with the researchers.

However, the fact that the participants of this study did choose to participate means that they might attach less value to their anonymity than others. While some were still secretive about their username online, there were a substantial amount that were quite open about their online information. Participants that completed the online survey were very forthcoming about their username, no matter the age, gender, educational level or length of membership.

Learning everywhere

This axial code, consisting of nine open codes, refers to all the places participants think they can learn. It also includes how participants think about learning and how this can be maximized in different areas. Some of the open codes are 'multiple sources of learning', 'gradually learning' and 'incorporating creative writing in school'. To give an example of the open code 'multiple sources of learning' participant S1 stated the following when asked if they agreed that they can only learn something at school: "*Oneens, veel dingen leer je in het dagelijks leven. Hoe je sommige dingen moet gaan aanpakken vertellen ze je niet op school maar moet je zelf ondervinden.*" Just as participant S1, fourteen others also mentioned that school is not the only place where learning takes place.

Seven participants explicitly mentioned that they would like to get the chance in high school to practice something they are interested in, in this case writing. The open code 'incorporating creative writing in school' illustrates this best. Participant I4 stated the following when asked how they would like this to be done: "*Of als het een keuzevak kan worden in een profile. Ik denk dat dat wel kan op zich [...] Misschien als ze muziek kunnen, misschien moet schrijven ook wel kunnen*". S5 said: "*Meer vrijheid, meer creativiteit*", referring to the assignments they get in high school. In short, participants stated they would like school to stimulate creative writing or at least the assignments should be less focused on how they write and more on what they write.

Wattpad and Sweek are spaces that participants felt encourages or motivates writing. I1 stated "*...het is een soort motivatie om verder te schrijven, omdat je toch hoofdstuk per hoofdstuk kan je uploaden. En dat maakt het [handiger]*". Others also stated that Wattpad motivated them to write because they could interact with other writers. For example S2 said; "*Ik word geïnspireerd door de motivatie die zij krijgen van reacties en hun*

enthousiasme om het verhaal te delen." Thus, Wattpad and Sweek encourage writers to write more and thereby offer writers something that they feel school doesn't.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn about the perspectives that adolescents from the online writing communities have about learning and the influence this community has on their self-formation. Previous studies have not focused on adolescents' motives to join such online communities but has instead focused on how these communities function and how adolescents' function within these communities. The following paragraphs aim to answer the three sub questions mentioned earlier focusing on the difference between Wattpad/Sweek and school, the communication mechanisms and its impact on the identity of adolescents, and the added value of engaging in online writing communities.

Choices, Time and Roles

Learning in online writing communities has some differences compared to learning at school. The first difference found in this study, is that adolescents explicitly mention their inability to make their own choices in school, due to the set curriculum. Adolescents indicate that school aims to teach as many people as possible in as little time as possible, leaving little room for the development of their individual interests. Consequently, adolescents feel the need to search for another platform, or affinity space (Gee, 2005), where they can dive into their own interests. This shows that adolescents not only follow their peers, but are also capable to pursue their interests even when these are not in line with the interests of their offline peers. Without any set objectives, adolescents join these communities where learning is 'spontaneous and experimental' as Greenhow and Robelia (2009) put it. Thus, Wattpad and Sweek are both examples of informal learning spaces that make room for creative interaction.

Another difference between school and online learning is the time available for observation, imitation and mastering of the skills. Although not explicitly mentioned, one can partially conclude that at school there is less time available to observe and imitate teachers before mastering the skills due to deadlines. This is in line with the previous statement made by Hanson-Smith (2013), where she mentioned that at school adolescents must engage in the activities whether they are ready or not. On the other hand, adolescents have total control on their online activities. Most of the adolescents stated that they began with reading others' stories, thus observing how writing occurs. Subsequently, they started writing their own stories and asked for feedback, thus they imitated what they observed

earlier and searched for further support of 'the experts'. With this support they can bring their current skills to the next level, and so illustrating Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development. When adolescents join these communities, they come with some certain skills and through observation, imitation and feedback, or 'scaffolding', they are can develop, for example, new writing or feedback skills (Vygotsky, 1978). As already mentioned, this was not explicitly said by the adolescents and thus was open for the interpretation of the researchers.

Lastly, joining such communities offers adolescents the opportunity to explore their identity by assuming different roles. In the beginning adolescents may be the rookies, but once they start writing and receiving feedback, they become more skilled and are in turn able to help the new rookies. Thus, adolescents can easily shift from pupil to 'expert' within these online communities. This role switching is particularly important for adolescents' identity development (Erikson, 1972; Feldman, 2015). By assuming different roles adolescents experience which responsibility and behavior each role acquires, therefore helping them shape their identity.

Virtual friends, Rules and Anonymity

Participants of both the Wattpad and the Sweek communities experienced the use and importance of communicating with other community members. Communication was the key to creating a feeling of community which lead to members making virtual friends and forming community norms and rules. One of the most important factors in creating this feeling of community is level of activity. Members that actively write, read and interact with others would have more opportunity to receive feedback, gain readers and gain recognition among the community. Subsequently this also becomes an unwritten rule because without active investment other members will not deem you worthy of their time.

Another unwritten rule is when giving feedback to other members, this feedback be appropriately adjusted to fit the feedback receiver. An older member of the community will not give a younger member a demotivational piece of advice that is neither constructive nor kind. This also refers back to the previous mentioned role-switching that occurred online and how adolescents learned to deal with these roles. In this case, an adolescent that assumes the role of teacher knows how he or she is supposed to give feedback in a constructive way. Written rules were also clear and included: no cursing, no bullying and no plagiarism. The rules were accepted and created by both the members and the creators of the sites. Making it clear that online communities want to be a positive social space where adolescents can safely communicate. Research done by Williams and Merton (2008) has

also shown that online sites have the potential to become safe outlets for self-expression and experimentation. Adolescents that feel unheard, misunderstood or in need of attention can channel this energy into something positive online, for example a self-written story or blog (Williams & Merton, 2008). The current study shows that writing helped participants to put their thoughts on paper and work out ideas. Thus, Wattpad and Sweek can be seen as a safe and positive outlet for adolescents that express themselves best when writing.

Research also found that adolescents' online public profiles often contained very personal, candid and intimate information about themselves (Williams & Merton, 2008). However, this study has found that participants preferred anonymity over openness. Parents were restricted in participating within their child's online life. While most were aware of their child's participation on Wattpad or Sweek, they were not allowed to read any stories. Often only virtual friends knew about the participants online identity or could read participant's online stories. Possibly this is because those friends understood what it meant to be a writer because they themselves were active online. Furthermore, the stories that participants wrote were often very personal or intimate as they were based on events that had happened in their own life. Thus, they felt more comfortable talking to their virtual or offline friends about their writing. Research found that adolescents often feel a strong emotional bond with their virtual friends because of the private conversations they have with each other online (Blanchard & Markus, 2002). During adolescence there is also a strong importance in building friendships because of the desire for autonomy from their parents and emotional distance (Holden, 2010). Results from the current study also show that virtual friends are required to follow strict guidelines of making time both online and offline for giving feedback, playing the role of emotional support system or motivator and being the participant's confidant. All things that are very natural for individuals to want in friendships during this developmental period (Holden, 2010).

Learning happens everywhere

School is not the only place where participants felt they learned something. Learning could happen at school, at home, with friends or online. Wattpad and Sweek were both seen as places where participants would learn new skills and develop themselves further. Online writing sites and traditional educational institutions should not be seen as opposites, but rather as two pieces of puzzle that perfectly fits together to complete the bigger picture. Online writing sites helped to improve upon the basic knowledge that adolescents acquired at school. Research on fanfiction writers partly supports the findings of the current study (Korobkova, 2014). Both found that participants saw their literary, vocabulary and writing skills improve with the active involvement in an online writing community. However,

Korobkova (2014) found that participants could not relate the skills and practices they learned online with what they learned in school. In other words, they saw their online interests as being completely different and unassociated with school. The participants of the current study did classify their participation within the online writing community as a hobby but also as a learning tool. For example, it was a way for them to practice writing in a different language, such as English. Skills learned online could be used in school and vice versa. Yet they did have ideas on how to make school more practical and interesting. They felt that by incorporating creative writing classes or other elective courses in school, adolescents would have more opportunity to develop their interests within a more structured setting. Participants also craved flexibility in choosing the academic level of their core classes so that they could focus more on the classes they were passionate about. A study done on American high school students found that motivation and self-determination were higher within elective courses than in their core courses. Motivation was higher when the students had the freedom to choose the classes they wanted to take (Ferrer-Caja & Weiss, 2002).

Research has shown that higher motivation within adolescents is associated with an increase in success (Wang & Eccles, 2011). Previous research partly supports the current findings. It seemed that participants that had earned more readers and/or likes were also more motivated to keep posting online and continue communication with other members. The same went for school; those that saw school as an important priority also experienced more success. However, there were also a few participants that did not define success in terms of followers or grades. They defined success as doing their best, feeling happy with the story they wrote, getting something out of what they learned at school and making friends. Thus, they had their own personal definition of success. The possible difference is that these members were active for more years. It could be inferred that these members are the ones that 'geek-out' about their online community and want to push their own boundaries. Thus, it can be inferred that other members are still in the beginning phases of simply 'hanging-out' or 'messaging-around' online (Ito et al., 2010). In other words, the more experienced members had specific writing goals. They were online to work on improving certain skill sets and not simply online to hang out with friends or mess around.

Strengths and weaknesses

By using the method of triangulation, this study has been able to generate more data to research the objective with because it looks at a variety of dimensions of the subject being studied. This method increases the reliability of the study because it helps to determine if similar results can be found with each method. Furthermore, validity is also

increased when comparison between different methods can occur. Having more insight into the researched factors specifically target the internal validity of study. Having two researchers also helps to reduce bias during data-collection and data-analysis (Boeije, 2010).

While the triangulation method has strengthened this project, limitations are still present. The first limitation is the small sample size, which influences the external validity and the generalizability of the results. However, generalization was not the aim of this study, exploration. External validity was also decreased because participants were not randomly selected into either the interview or survey group, making comparison of results difficult. While generalizability was negatively impacted, not only by the small sample size, but also because of the subjectivity of the interviewers. It also means that results are less objective and verifiable. However, the impact of this was decreased with use of researcher triangulation. Finally, it remains important to mention that it was difficult to validate the findings, thus there remains a chance misinterpretation of the data took place.

Future research

New insights have been gained to show the importance of exploring the world of online writing communities from the perspectives of adolescents. Therefore, it is recommended that in the future, research be done with a larger and more diverse sample size. The population of this study has been shown to prefer anonymity online and therefore it is important that the time be taken to integrate further within the community. A second recommendation is that a longitudinal method of data collection be used to gain more insights into how perspectives of learning evolve over the years. Through longitudinal data it is also possible to pinpoint developmental changes.

Conclusion

Many opinions and narratives exist amongst young people when it comes to the 'how', the 'what' and the 'where' of learning. Ultimately, learning was seen as the process of forming the self, occurring everywhere can in different ways. Firstly, success within online writing communities is very different than at school. Unlike at school where grades are the most important requirement to succeed, adolescents expressed multiple times that the process they go through online is more important than the destination where they are heading (e.g., a professional writer). To say that they are successful Wattpad or Sweek members, means that they receive high quality feedback, can give high quality feedback and can incorporate this feedback in their story. While superficial likes are appreciated, intensive feedback is what defines success on Wattpad and/ or Sweek.

Learning and self-formation happens through feedback. Feedback is one of the most important tools for communication within the online writing community. It allows members to learn from others that are more skilled and help others that are less skilled. They can switch between the role of the teacher and the pupil when they interact with others online. Through this interaction they form a unique online identity that may not always correspond with their offline identity. Both Wattpad and Sweek were seen as a safe and positive outlet for adolescent writers to express themselves. Thus, online writing allows members to experiment with different roles and expressions of self. Thereby gradually forming themselves through a process of interactive learning.

Another important component of self-formation and learning explicitly mentioned by adolescents was the pursuit of their own interests. At school, adolescents said, they sometimes deal with subjects they are not interested in or these might not be necessarily something they need for future perspectives. However, online, adolescents had the complete freedom to invest in their own interests. Wattpad and Sweek members expressed how important it was for them to invest their time in something they enjoy and are highly interested in. Writing is not an extra activity for them but something they need for later career purposes.

Although adolescents are discontent with the little space available at school where they can express their creativity, school remains important for them. There is a consensus among adolescents that in high school you learn the basic skills and that having a career is still necessary. However, adolescents would appreciate if there was more space available at school for them to develop their creative writing skills. Although some schools had workshops and others had one or two creative writing exercises, they would like creative writing to be part of the curriculum. Creative writing should be an individual course, like music, dance, or theater.

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Appendix A

Table A1: Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Education	Community of preference	Gender	Time active
I1	18	WO	Wattpad	Female	2 years
I2	16	Gymnasium	Wattpad	Female	4 years
I3	19	HBO	Wattpad	Female	2 years
I4	18	WO	Sweek	Male	2 weeks
I5	20	WO	Wattpad	Female	5 Years
I6	18	WO	Wattpad	Female	4 years
S1	14	VWO	Both	Female	1 year
S2	19	HBO	Sweek	Female	1 year
S3	16	HAVO	Both	Female	2 years
S4	14	VMBO	Both	Female	2 years
S5	21	HBO	Wattpad	Female	6 years
S6	17	MBO	Wattpad	Female	3 years
S7	14	VWO	Wattpad	Female	1 year
S8	15	VWO	Wattpad	Female	2 years
S9	16	VWO	Wattpad	Female	3 years
S10	18	MBO	Sweek	Male	10 months
S11	18	MBO	Sweek	Female	5 months
S12	17	VWO	Sweek	Female	2 months

Appendix B

Topic List Online Writing Communities

Topic List:

- Getting to know the participant
- Their description of online writing communities and learning
- Reflection on learning and community formation
- Application of online community context within schools

The interview**Part 1:**Introduction:

- Introduction
- Small talk
 - Journey to the interview place
 - How was their day/week?
- RECORDING STARTS*
- Research: anonymity, stop whenever, okay with recording?
- Thank you for participating

Background information general:

- Age
- Where they live
- What grade are they in and which level (VMBO/HAVO/VWO/MBO/HBO/WO)

Part 2:Basic background information about Wattpad/Sweek:

- How long have you been active on wattpad/sweek?
- How did you get to know about wattpad/sweek?
- Why did you join wattpad/sweek?
- How many much time do you spent on wattpad/sweek?
 - Specify hours a day or days a week.
- Who inspires you?
- Who are the best of the best on wattpad/sweek?
- How many readers/followers do you have?
 - What do you think of the amount of followers you have?
- Are you connected to people from all around the world or just people in the Netherlands?

In depth background information about Wattpad/Sweek

- Have you published any stories on wattpad/sweek? *If yes proceed with the following questions*
 - Did you get any feedback? (Yes, proceed with the following questions)
 - How did you handle the feedback?
 - Did you make changes in your story based on the feedback?
- (If has not published anything) → Why didn't you publish anything?
 - Have you left feedback for other members?

- How do you come up with a feedback/comment? (Based on what)
 - Example: based on previous readings, based on academic knowledge etc.
- Which genre do you like writing about the most?
- Do you read a lot of stories of other members?
- Which genre do you like to read the most?
- Are you also a member on other writing sites?
- Do you have friends on wattpad?
 - Who do you consider a 'wattpad/sweek friend'?
 - Example: someone who gives you lots of feedback
- Are you part of any special writing groups within the wattpad community?
- Do you stay anonymous online?
 - Why yes/not?

Writing Offline

- How long does it take for you to write a story?
- Where do you find inspiration?
- Do you have people read your work before you put it online?
- Do you base your characters on people you know? Of on experiences in your life?
- What do you like most about writing?
- How long have you been writing? And why did you start?
- Do you write in different languages?
 - Why?

Part 3:

Background information about school

- Do you see similarities in writing for a school subject or on Wattpad?
 - Why yes/no?
 - What are the differences in your opinion?
- Does it take you as long, longer or shorter to write something for school in comparison to something you write for wattpad?
 - Why do you think it takes you as long/longer/shorter?
- Do people at school know you are active on Wattpad?
 - Why did/didn't you tell them?

Opinion on changing the school writing context

- Would you enjoy writing in school more if you could choose what you get to write about?
 - Why?
- Have you become a better writer since you joined wattpad?
 - Can you explain which skills do you think you have improved?
- Do you agree that you can learn something **only** at school?
 - Explain why yes or why not.

Note: In part 3 we aim to let the respondent give his/her opinion as much as possible, so we can react on it and keep the conversation going. Our main focus lies in their opinion and how they define learning and personal and academic development.

Ending

Stop the recording

Ask participant if interested in participating in further research of online communities.

Thank participant for her/his participation.

Appendix C
Online Survey: Online Writing Communities

1. Wat is je leeftijd?

- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21

2. Wat is je sekse?

- Vrouw
- Man
- Anders

3. Waar kom je vandaan?

- Nederland
- België
- Anders

4. Op welk niveau volg jij onderwijs?

- Vmbo
- Havo
- Vwo
- Mbo
- Hbo
- Wo

5. Je doet mee aan dit onderzoek doordat je lid ben van een online schrijf community, welke is dat?

6. Wat is je gebruikersnaam en/of website url (bloggers)?

7. Sinds wanneer ben je lid van de online schrijf community?

8. Beschrijf hoe jij tot deze online schrijf community bent gekomen.

9. Wat heeft je het meest aangetrokken aan deze community dat je hebt besloten om lid te worden?

10. Heb jij vrienden gemaakt binnen jouw schrijf community?

Zo ja, hoe is het tot stand gekomen?

Zo nee, waarom niet?

11. Hoe lang duurde het voordat je je eigen verhaal online zette?

12. Beschrijf het proces dat je doormaakt van idee tot het geüploade verhaal.

13. Hoe ga je met de feedback die je krijgt op je verhalen om?

14. Geeft jij ook feedback aan anderen?

Zo ja, hoe vorm je je feedback?

Denk aan: kennis vanuit school, ervaring, voorkeuren, vrienden etc.

15. Hoeveel tijd ben je kwijt aan alle activiteiten rondom de community?

Denk aan: schrijven, lezen, feedback geven, contact maken met anderen, reageren op anderen enzovoorts. Probeer de tijd uit te drukken in minuten uren of dagen en beschrijf hoeveel tijd je kwijt bent per onderdeel.

16. Hoe ervaar je het schrijven? Leg uit.

Bijvoorbeeld: rustgevend of uitdagend of iets dergelijks.

17. We hebben meegekregen dat sommige leden hun lidmaatschap niet bekend maken aan ouders of vrienden. Waarom kies je daar wel of niet voor?

18. Wat zijn volgens jou de verschillen en de overeenkomsten tussen schrijven op school en schrijven online?

19. Zijn jouw schrijfvaardigheden verbeterd door deel te nemen aan deze community? Leg uit waarom wel of waarom niet.

20. Op welke manier word je geïnspireerd door anderen binnen je community? Leg uit.

Bijvoorbeeld door hun schrijfstijl, aantal volgers, aantal reacties enzovoorts.

23. Wanneer is iemand succesvol op school naar jouw mening?

25. Wanneer is iemand succesvol binnen jouw online community volgens jouw mening?

26. “Je kan alleen op school nieuwe vaardigheden leren”.

Leg uit waarom je het eens of oneens bent met deze stelling.

27. Als je het schrijfonderwijs zou kunnen veranderen, wat zou je dan veranderen?

Bijvoorbeeld: de opdrachten die gegeven worden, manier van beoordelen of de leesstof.

28. “Mijn online community heeft zijn eigen normen, waarden en regels.”

Leg uit waarom je mee eens of mee oneens bent met deze stelling.

29. Is er nog andere belangrijke informatie die je graag met ons wil delen over jouw online community?

30. Wat is volgens jou de definitie van leren?

31. Wat versta jij onder 'jezelf ontwikkelen'?

Appendix D
Information letter and Informed Consent



Utrecht University

Information Letter and Consent Form

Date: Spring 2018

Title of Project: Online Community Learning

Student Researchers: Thaïna Laclé
Lisanne Stappers

Teacher: Margreet Moeskeer

You are invited to participate in a study that concerns online community learning. As a participant in this study, you will be asked to complete an interview in which you will be presented with questions pertaining to your online participation on the website Wattpad.com. Specifically, these questions are looking to answer the following research questions:

- How would you (a young person that is active on the online writing community, Wattpad) describe the community you are an active participant in?
- How do you give and receive feedback from other active online users?
- What does this platform mean to you as a participant?

Participation in this study is voluntary and will take approximately one hour of your time. By volunteering for this study, you will learn about psychological research in general and the topic of this study in particular. In addition, you can receive the results of this study if you wish so. There are no personal benefits to participation. However, it must be noted that your participation will help researchers learn more about online communities. This research project is rather unconventional because we are asking the participants to be active researchers rather than passive participants. You may decline to answer any questions presented during the study if you so wish. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time. All information you provide is considered completely confidential; your name will not be included or in any other way associated, with the data collected in this study. However, because this is a qualitative study, meaning that the researchers seek to interpret the data in order to better understand the social life of it's participants, you may be identified individually in the written reports. There are no known or anticipated risks associated to participation in this study.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and approved by multiple teachers at the University of Utrecht. However, the final decision about participation is yours. If you or your parents have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact either the researchers or the teacher.

Thank you for your assistance in this project.

Fill something out or a box?

Please sign here if you understand the above information and would like to be a participant in this study.

--

Appendix E

Table E1: Coding Scheme

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Open Coding
Modern Learning	Feedback	Receives feedback on grammar and spelling Gives feedback on grammar and spelling Receives feedback on story Gives feedback on story Receives feedback in private Receives feedback in public Peer feedback group Participant uses feedback High quality feedback Low quality feedback
	Self-development	School limits creativity Making own choices Personal branding Reason membership Writers as role models Not imitating role models Developing writing skills

	Writers goals
	Writing as a hobby
	Feeling writing gives
Success	Wattpad/Sweek success
	School success
	Active member of community
	Need for structure
	Proofreading
	Writing in parts
	Sources of inspiration
	Time spent reading
	Time spent on story
	Writing process
Community communication	Feeling of community
	Written community rules
	Unwritten community rules
	Low quality contact
	High quality contact
	Virtual friends
	Online bullies
	Online pressure followers
	Misleading information
	online followers
	Building a network
Anonymity	Anonymity writing

	Restricted parental involvement
	Stories are deviant from daily behavior
	Open about online writing
	Username anonymity
	Writing exposes personal information
Learning everywhere	School is priority
	Learning from others
	School is important
	Writes in mother tongue
	Gradually learning
	Writes in foreign language
	Multiple sources of learning
	Wattpad encourages writing
