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Learning lives with/in digital media: Emergence of online economy disputants in the midst of economic crisis in South Korea

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Online learning, informal learning, self-directed learning

Abstract: This study aims to understand adult online informal learning illuminating a way of becoming an influential social figure. We interviewed five famous online economy disputants whose postings were very popular in Korea during the global financial crisis in 2008-2009. We explored how they learned and found that their self-directedness interplayed with the context of other-directedness, a sense of being stimulated and indebted enhanced their learning process, and dynamics of anonymity and social recognition were keys to their emergence.

During the world economic crisis in 2008-2009 there was an interesting phenomenon in Korean online space. An anonymous online disputant, whose pen name was Minerva, obtained his fame as “Online Economy President,” by predicting the collapse of Lehman Brothers and fluctuating Won(Korean currency)-Dollar exchange rate. Minerva wrote his opinions in the anonymous discussion board (entitled Agora) of Daum, one of leading Korean portal sites like Yahoo. He became more famous after being prosecuted for spreading false information, but he was later acquitted. Along with Minerva, there were several other people in Agora who were collectively referred as Gosu (Master Hand). In the Agora context, Gosu means a person who can analyze and explain economic phenomena to those who cannot understand economic behavior when explained by the dominant media coverage. Gosu’s postings became a gateway for many Agora visitors to understand the economic uncertain and, risks of the time. Interestingly, most of the Gosu did not have a strong formal education training. For instance, Minerva studied engineering in a technical college. The others majored in philosophy, forest science, and biology in university and one had only a high school diploma. Most of them, however, eventually published books on the economy.

Learning can be best understood as a lifelong activity that is both within- and outside of various social institutions. The cases of Gosu indicate that formal education is not the only way to acquire expertise on certain area. For them, the gateway to learning and the outlet for ideas on the economy was through an online discussion board, which neither can be classified as formal nor non-formal education. Also their learning happened within the context of globalization and political life of South Korea. Learning is always situated in our everyday lives. So learning is amorphous since adult learners’ prior experiences and socio-cultural contexts are complex (Kang, 2007). Though explaining this complex entanglement of learning lives may appear to be an unsurmountable challenge, learning is, nonetheless an important contributor of one’s life changes. We become different beings because of our learning. Gosu are not exception.

How people reconstruct their learning lives through digital media and technology becomes important issue in Adult and Lifelong learning practice. Although many studies on online learning were carried out in formally designed contexts, recent research highlights the

opportunities for informal learning through diverse forms of digital media in an emerging learning society (Drotner, Jensen, & Schröder, 2008; Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006). The importance of building communities of learners is acknowledged to maximize learning.

The individual participation process, the characteristics of participants' interactions and the identity formation form the primary foci of the research in this line. For example, Preece and Shneiderman (2009) suggest four stages of participation process in online communities; reader-contributor-collaborator-leader. Wang, Sierra & Folger (2003) suggested three markers which build a dynamic online learning community among adult learners; active participation, the forming of shared identity, and the establishment of social network.

The perspective of self-directed learning has been studied in adult and lifelong education field over long term and various meanings of self-directed learning were discussed. For instance, Candy (1991) suggested four dimensions of self-directedness: personal autonomy, self-management, learner-control, and autodidaxy. Analyzing learning experience of Gosu might be important for this reason. First, it would enable us to observe the actual cases of self-directedness and to reciprocally examine the perspective with practice. Second, close interrelatedness of online environment and self-directed learning could be investigated in an actual setting.

The purpose of this study is to explore learning lives that enabled these famous online economy disputants (Gosu hereafter) to emerge in the context of the global economic crisis and online culture. The research questions guiding this study were: (1) What was the learning process of online economy disputants? (2) What are the characteristics of online economy disputants as adult learners? (3) How is the online space related to the learning of online economy disputants?

Method

Qualitative methodology was employed because the study aims to understand cultural phenomenon in depth. Three types of data were collected. Firstly, we interviewed five online economy disputants as main informants. ZZ is in his 30s, a construction worker with a high school diploma. YA is also in his 30s and works as a consultant in the field of social work. He has a B.A. in forestry science and M.A. in social work. AS is in his early 40s and works as an insurance planner. He majored in business and worked for an investment bank during the late 1990s financial crisis. TH, is in his 30s, is a college dropout (majored in philosophy) and had worked for news agency as a clerk. PF, is in his 20s, has a B.A. in business administration and works at one of the leading securities firms in Korea. We also interviewed three other people as supporting informants in order to understand online economy disputants. JU and IM work for *Daum* and LE is an employee of publishing company that published many Gosus' book. Secondly, as the interviews were in progress we also analyzed the articles written by famous disputants and its tagged responses. Thirdly, we also collected books written by and newspaper articles on the disputants. We could not interview Minerva even though we contacted his legal representative for a possible interview. Instead, we used numerous newspaper articles and interview transcripts. And, we could not contact one of the famous Gosu, NA, since we could not obtain his contact information. AS wrote a book with him but we only obtained basic information that he has a Ph. D. in natural science and working as a professor in U.S. For the analysis of the data, we employed a constant comparative analysis method (Merriam, 2009). We analyzed data independently and discussed each other's findings throughout the analysis and writing process. Initial codes and themes were refined several times during this process.

Findings

Emergence of Gosu was made possible not just because of their personal characteristics but also because of the wider social conditions. We delineate some factors attributed to the learning lives of Gosu.

Social Origin of Learning Motivation

Just ten years after the late 1990's severe financial crisis, the Korean people again experienced a global economic crisis initiated by U.S. insolvent mortgage loans. People were so anxious about the economic prospect that they wanted to know how to protect their assets. Gosus thought they should prepare themselves with useful knowledge because they experienced the harshness of financial crisis (in)directly ten years ago. Minerva said, "During IMF times [of 1990s], my father suffered so much from cosigning private loan. One of my friend's father committed suicide after massive loss of stock investment. A sense of feeling that I can be a victim led me to study economics" (in an interview with *The Daily Sports*, 2010.7.1). Similarly, YA started to learn about the economy in order to understand the rapidly changing situation and inform the right decision. He said,

I had been totally ignorant of economy. At the peak of the candlelight street protest [in 2008] I thought that the world was at the inflection point and economy could change drastically. Furthermore, I thought it had a great impact on my life. I clicked the Agora to know the economy. By the way there was an uproar. Many were talking about gloomy economic outlook. Unfortunately, I could not understand it at all. I was frustrated. So, I started to study....In that situation, I also had to check whether my economic decision is right or wrong (YA)

Gosu's initial contact with Agora was not uniform; ZZ and AS incidentally entered Agora through the hypertext links while surfing the Internet. YA happened to know Agora by participating in the street protests. PF visited Agora out of curiosity after watching news of Minerva. However, they shared the same motivation to understand and help one another to cope with the on-going risky economic situation.

Self-Directedness in the Context of Other-Directedness

There were two kinds of Gosus in Agora. While some of them met Agora without any knowledge about the economy, the others came to Agora with some expertise. According to Preece and Shneiderman (2009)'s four-level classification, the former might be classified into *reader* and the latter were in the one of three stages which were *contributor-collaborator-leader*. Although each Gosu joined Agora with a different level, they eventually became leaders in Agora while other people within Agora did not. Thus, it was necessary to pay attention to the learning characteristics of Gosu, which made them different from the majority of other visitors in Agora. First of all, Gosus were highly self-directed learners. For instance, PF, AS and TH all had a passion for reading and gathering data. They selectively chose materials and managed their time well for intensive studying.

I started to read thirty economy analysis reports issued by securities company everyday. Just reading and reading whatever...I came back home at 2 o'clock in the morning [after absorbed in reading]. While I read the reports, I found that [the data] converged into one conclusion...and then I happened to summarize them like 'what this report is saying...' I did that for one or two months. (PF)

PF said he always read a book while he was commuting during his college years. He was not the only Gosu who had a disciplined habit of studying. TH developed his own method of organizing all the materials he had read to efficiently search them later. In order to save a time for reading AS tries not to drive himself when he visits his customers. He goes to the office by six thirty in the morning to read foreign news, blog postings and books before he began office work at nine o'clock. He also tried to write at least one posting a day. AS transformed himself from a *contributor* delivering foreign media news to Agora users to a *leader* actively discussing the roots of and alternatives to Korean economic problems. AS commented: "I organize my thoughts by writing...some people like Ph. D. students might immediately write their thoughts what they have already. In my case, however, reading and writing is the process of developing my knowledge."

Meanwhile, ZZ and YA were far from Gosu at the beginning. They began with reading the Gosu's postings. They considered Minerva and NA as their 'teacher'. Though they never met their teacher, they tried to understand Minerva and NA sometimes with the help of search engines.

I tried to read his writing, but to understand the meaning of some terms he used without explanation such as inflation or liquidity trap, I inserted the term in web search engine and located a good website with easy explanation of economic terms...I studied them all. (YA)

I don't have to look up books. And, looking for books is actually annoying. So I search the web. Then, most of [what I search for] were found. In blogs, [somebody] explained very kindly. (ZZ)

ZZ and YA learned basic concepts and the logic of economics by themselves for a few months. Then, they were able to translate their teachers' writing for those who did not understand them. Once ZZ translated Minerva's writing into a brief and easy version, many Agora users were very enthusiastic about his posting and named it 'decoding'. ZZ was motivated by these positive feedbacks and kept decoding so that others could understand Minerva. ZZ moved from a *reader* to a *contributor*. After studying every NA posting, YA wrote his own understanding of NA's up-to-date posting. In the posting he included a message to NA to see whether his understanding was correct. NA gave him quick feedback. In the interviews, both ZZ and YA did not claim to be Gosu. However, by studying Minerva and NA and by writing their own understanding, they developed themselves into collaborators and leaders in Agora.

Stimulated and Indebted

Gosus are highly self-directed learners but this does not necessarily imply that they are solely independent. They were stimulated by other people in Agora to increase their learning. For instance, when PF first read Minerva's posting he first felt reverence. He had felt helpless in front of the massive depreciation of financial assets even though he was highly attuned to the

economic situations when meeting his customers every day. He wanted to know more and help his own customers, like Minerva did in Agora. AS found that NA's postings were inspiring and learned much from him. AS left comments to NA's postings to ask what he could not understand. AS and NA helped each other in analyzing and understanding economic situations in Agora. Later they wrote a book together.

Stimulation for learning was not just from another Gosu in Agora. A strong stimulus for learning more and deeper came from the general Agora users. PF was surprised by the responses to his first posting. He said, "Numerous replies were tagged below my posting. Furthermore, about 80% of replies praised me.....People treated me as a big figure." The positive response was like a catalyst in his self-directed learning. He read more reports, newspapers and books. YA also enjoyed various responses for further learning. Though he learned from NA's postings, he also tried to get feedback from the other Agora users about his understanding of NA's posting as well as posting his own analysis of economic phenomena. He enjoyed the anonymity of Agora since people could freely criticize other's opinions. YA and many other Gosus developed themselves more as leaders in Agora based, in part, on the prompt responses from general Agora users. This gave them have a sense of indebtedness to Agora, which also spurred their writing on economy in Agora. After Minerva's arrest, many Gosus left Agora. But YA and TH wrote continuously because they learned with a help of Agora users. YA also said,

Since I started to upload my postings in Agora, it was the people who added replies of thanks that motivated me [to keep studying]. I could not just get out of Agora, even though I reached to the desired level [of understanding economy]. I felt a kind of sense of debt to those who motivated me or criticized or added [values] to [my postings]. (YA)

TH started to write postings after many Gosus left Agora due to the potential threat caused by Minerva's arrest. He wished Agora to be protected as he saw protection as an extension of learning within the site. TH said, "I learned much here and I could publish a book thanks to Agora. I think I am heavily indebted to Agora, so I have many things to say." Many Agora users also left numerous messages regarding the safety of Gosu and encouraging them.

Love it or Hate it: Dynamics of Agora

Though Gosus were motivated by positive feedback, Agora was not a just a friendly and comfortable space. Agora, as an anonymous bulletin board, is a full of malicious, anti-social, and absurd claims. Acid and unfavorable responses divide Agora users into two groups broadly. Between pro- and anti-government, or between for the haves and the have-nots, they vilified each other by stigmatizing their counterparts with derogatory names. Gosus had to face this unfavorable feedback. Each Gosu perceived the interplay of anonymity, participation and learning differently. AS felt offended;

I don't want to hear abusive responses. Why do I have to be abused for my writing? They should have written their own one... how difficult it is (to write). If I write something, it does not pop up automatically while I just sit at the desk, does it? I have to pull my thoughts together. However, sometimes there are lots of rude persons. It's alright to say 'Do you think so? I think differently. You are not wrong but different.' But, there are people just swearing wildly... (AS)

AS got hurt so much that he left Agora. He opened his own blog. TH, who read Gosus' posting for a long time, considered the anonymous and ruthless criticism and was quick to provide feedback.

Because of Agora's culture of replies, postings are evaluated very quickly. It caused a kind of synergetic effect. Individuals are forced to study more to keep their own influential position [in Agora]. They don't want to disappoint the others unwittingly. [Also they were] afraid of.....being evaluated, compared...discussed, so, study more. People just make Gosu as a brand. When they read Gosu's posting, they agree on it and stand in line for it. They evaluate, compare and discuss who is superior or inferior right away persistently.....Some people who can't bear this dynamics are beaten off and others view it with philosophical eyes (TH)

YA reported that he enjoyed all feedback tagged to his posting. PF might be a case of having philosophical eyes. He tried to be indifferent to any comments. The impact of anonymity within Agora was complex. It sometimes contributed to more participation and learning. At the same time, it also deteriorated the Agora environment overall and sometimes forced participants to withdraw from it.

Social Recognition of Gosu

While Minerva obtained his fame as the "Online Economy President", other disputants of Agora came into the spotlight. *Daum* defeated its competitors with popular Agora page views. With government's prosecution of Minerva for disseminating false information, Agora gained more attention and credibility from the general public. This is why publishing companies paid attention to Gosu as a new kind of author. Publishing companies thought Gosu had a fixed circle of readers. LE said, "[even though Gosu were neither professor nor experts] they got sales power, bookstores and publishers recognized its sales power."

Watching news on Minerva, LE confirmed the popularity of Gosus. Even though Gosus were far from the traditional authors, LE's company planned to publish books of Gosu. TH was surprised when the company contacted him.

I had never thought of writing a book. I just had a dream of writing one in my fifties...I probably made the biggest decision in my life...I concluded that I could write a book to help ordinary people study economics. And, I thought I would grow up much after I finish the book. (TH)

AS, YA, TH and PF published books with LE's publishing company. None of them thought that they would have been able to publish books without their experiences in Agora. Nevertheless, the experience of writing a book required additional study since they had to consider readers who might differ from the typical Agora users. Writing a hundreds-of -pages book is far different from writing words posting in Agora even if the postings added up to thousands of words. Also they had to collect additional and more diverse evidence to support their opinions. Publishing a book might be a confirmation of the birth of a new kind of intellectual who arrives through a never-before-seen pathway.

Conclusion

This research may deeply contribute to the understanding of adult online informal learning. It especially illuminates a way of becoming an influential social figure without receiving formal education in an established higher education institution. Also, this study provides insights to collective teaching and learning contexts which are taking place online not designed initially for pedagogical purposes. An online bulletin board can function as an alternative learning space for some social issues. Furthermore, this implies that adult educators and practitioners need to be aware of the influence of digital media and how it supports certain types of learning. This eventually elevates the importance of providing enough opportunities for digital literacy among the online adult learning community.

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