Frame switches and identity performances:
Alternating between online and offline*

PÅL ANDRÉ AAR SAND

Abstract

This study problematizes activity frames and participation frameworks (Goffman 1981), exploring how students deploy online (MSN Messenger) and offline activity frames in identity performances. One problem in analyzing participation frameworks and particularly notions of subordinate forms, like crossplay, byplay, and sideplay, is that these concepts require that the analyst can identify one dominant activity. This was not possible in the present data, which consist of video recordings of computer activities in a seventh-grade classroom. It is shown how MSN (online) identities were invoked in subsequent and intermittent face-to-face interaction; a dialogue that started on MSN would continue in face-to-face interaction, and vice versa. This means that frame switches constituted important features of the students’ identity work. Similarly, the students employed nicknames or what are here called tags, that is, textual-visual displays of ‘speaker’ identities, located in the boundary zone between online and offline activities. In the classroom interactions, there was thus not one dominant activity frame, but rather the activities involved borderwork, and more specifically frame switches and a strategic use of tags.

Keywords: participation framework; activity frames; online activities; offline activities; identities; borderwork.

1. Activity frames, participation frameworks, and borderwork

In discussions about Internet activities, identity is a frequently occurring topic (Turkle 1996; Bell and Kennedy 2000; Hine 2000; Miller and Slater 2000). Studies of identity performance in computer-mediated environments focus on the question of how we can understand the subject in virtual space. Several of these studies deal with the distinction ‘online/
offline’ and have shown how self-presentations in chat rooms, news groups, and games are closely related to other arenas and activities in people’s lives (Miller and Slater 2000; Turkle 1996; Sundén 2002). These studies suggest that communities on the Internet are to be seen as embodied activities rooted in local experience and everyday lives. Life consists of multiple activities located in different places such as chat rooms on the Internet, as well as in the corner pub. Seeing online and offline as given spatial descriptions builds on the assumption that subjects are just traveling through these spaces and that the spaces are fixed and nonproductive. The point of departure for the present research is that the boundedness of ‘offline’ and ‘online’ is seen as a social achievement (Leander and McKim 2003). Hence, in this paper, the online/offline distinction is used as an analytical heuristic in its focus on young people’s use of MSN (Microsoft Net) Messenger while they are located in a classroom. More specifically, I study identity performance and how it may transcend the online/offline distinction.

To some degree, participating in social life implies that we can understand each other and act in a common world (Goffman 1974). By jointly deciding what practice is taking place at a given moment, we also agree upon the ‘rules’ that guide the practice at hand. Different activity frames regulate our implicit rules for routine activities, such as which activities should take place in a classroom and how they should ideally work (1974). Activity frames are not to be seen as something static or given once and for all, but as products of ongoing social interactions, where frames can be blurred and even changed during the situation at hand. The framework of an activity creates expectations of what is going to happen, of how activities are ‘supposed’ to be performed, and ‘guidelines’ on how to understand the activities (Tannen and Wallat 1999 [1987]). As an example, schools may contain activities such as teaching, playing, and teasing, which all work in accordance with local rules of how to behave. Similarly, classroom situations may involve both online and offline activity frames. In his discussion of participation frameworks, Goffman (1981) argues that participants have different speaker or participant positions, which vary across different activity frames. In the present argument, I will try to apply the distinction of ‘ratified’ participants, versus ‘bystanders’, who are not legitimate participants (1981). To become a ratified participant, one needs to know how to act appropriately. The interaction between the participants can be described as byplay, which is communication between ratified participants that is not part of the main activity, as crossplay, which is ‘communication between ratified participants and bystanders across the boundaries of the dominant encounter’ (1981: 134), and as sideplay, which involves communication among bystanders. Goffman’s
notion of ‘participation frameworks’ highlights entitlement and how participants relate to one another and to the dominant activity at hand.

Activity frames do not imply that activities are given or unambiguous. According to Jones (2005: 25), a situation is ‘... made up of layers of various realities overlapping and interacting with one another’. Jones argues for a view in which activities are not separated from each other; rather they are intertwined parts of the same situation. The term *hybridity* has become a metaphor foregrounding that we cannot describe a phenomenon as, for instance, purely linguistic, visual, or material (e.g., Latour 1993; Sarangi and Coulthard 2000). The switching between layers, or aspects, in a situation has been studied by looking at how different aspects are made relevant through participants’ *frame management* (Coupland and Coupland 2000). Hybridity and frame management point to a multiplicity of activities, which moreover means that the participants are offered (different) positions in relation to these activities (Goffman 1981). This, in turn, actualizes questions regarding boundaries, inclusion and exclusion.

In this paper, what I will call ‘borderwork’ will be used as an analytical tool to highlight how boundaries and borders between activity frames are worked upon in students’ use of MSN. Barth (1969) has studied how boundaries are created and maintained in social interaction across ethnic barriers. In contact between groups, there are criteria and signals for identification, as well as a structuring of interactions, that allow differences (1969). Likewise, Thorne (1993) has investigated borderwork between boys and girls. In her fieldwork on pupils’ interaction in two schools, she noticed that ‘the loose aggregations boys and girls consolidate into the boys and the girls as separate and reified groups’ (1993: 65; emphasis in original). Even more interesting is the fact that Thorne shows that boundaries between the girls and the boys were challenged and crossed by some of the participants. When these boundaries were actualized, location and activity were of importance. Thorne (1993) and Barth (1969) have focused on borderwork in relation to the broad identity categories ‘ethnicity’ and ‘gender’, whereas my argument focuses on borderwork in relation to the distinction between students’ online and offline identities.

2. **Online nicknames as identity performance**

In social studies of technology, there has been little emphasis on the major technological changes and their impact on children’s everyday life (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 2001; Valentine and Holloway 2002). One possible reason is that much of the research on children and computer technology involves studies based on questionnaires and interviews (e.g.,
Research on Internet identities has often been conducted in the context of multi-user domains (MUD) (e.g., Turkle 1996; Pargman 2000; Sundén 2002) but also in relation to more regular online chat activities. Identity work in young people’s Internet activities has been studied in relation to how they choose and use their online nicknames (Bechar-Israeli 1995; Lou 2005; Tingstad 2003). Nicknames ‘...say something about who they [the participants] are, and act as an invitation to others to talk to them’ (Crystal 2001: 160). This means that nicknames work in two ways. First, they tell the other participants about who you are/want to be, and second, they constitute a way of displaying interests, sex, location, age, and ethnicity with the purpose of getting others to talk to you.

Tingstad (2003) has studied children’s activities in two chat rooms for young people on the Web. Her analyses are based on interviews with children and participant observation in online chat rooms, where she categorized identities in relation to age, sex, location, ethnicity, and interests. Tingstad classified her data into 16 categories of chat-room nicknames. Examples of these categories are animals, well-known people and places, documented in nicknames such as HOT girl, KISS_ME, popboy, Osloboy, and cat. According to Tingstad, nicknames are visual signs of personal identities. The nickname introduces the personal profile a participant wants to present. But creating a nickname is also a question of gaining access to and being available to other chatters. The main difference between face-to-face interaction and online chatting is that participants translate themselves from bodies into texts when entering online chatting.

Lou (2005) has studied self-presentations of 26 individuals, mostly Chinese and from her own MSN contact list, in computer-mediated interactions in MSN. During a period of seven months, Lou recorded about 300 different names. The number of nicknames in relation to the number of individuals tells us that the names displayed in MSN are regularly changed. Lou shows that the displayed name often consists of a two-part structure, where the first part consists of the online name and the second part either of (i) a quote, (ii) an opinion, declaration, complaint, (iii) location, existential state of being, (iv) message to all, or (v) message to some. Of particular interest is that the first part of the name usually remained the same over the period, while the second part was changed regularly in relation to the individual’s mood. The displayed identity on MSN consists of both continuity and discontinuity, which makes the chatter both familiar and vibrant. The way this two-fold structure of the nickname works indicates that there is a boundary between online and offline identities, as the second part displays an emotional state anchored outside MSN. Both Tingstad (2003) and Lou (2005) focus on the nicknames as
they appear on the screen, as textual expressions and performances. Yet neither of these studies discusses the interface between visual and textual aspects of nicknames. In this paper, I will refer to nicknames in terms of tags (which is a graffiti painter’s signature), foregrounding the complex visual-textual design of MSN identities. My focus will be on students’ use of MSN Messenger while they are located in a classroom. This means that we have to study bodily and textual performance as well as classroom talk.

3. Research site and method

The present investigation is based on fieldwork in a school, located in an immigrant-dense suburb of a Swedish city. The school consists of approximately 430 students. During one school year, I followed, 3–4 times a week, a seventh-grade class consisting of 18 students in the age range of 13–14 years, nine of whom were girls and nine boys. Among these students, half lived in the countryside and generally did not have access to broadband or other high-speed Internet connections. Informed consent was obtained from all 18 students and their parents as well as from the head teacher of the school and the teachers responsible for this class. All names have been anonymized to protect confidentiality.

During the fieldwork, I video-recorded the students’ use of computers in the classroom (approximately 30 hours). As I used only one video camera, its placement in the classroom was always a question of how to get the best quality of recording while switching between focusing on the screen and the students. Classroom activities have also been captured in field notes. Moreover, the students were interviewed twice about their computer habits, once in focus groups at the beginning of the school year and once through individual interviews at the end of the year. The interviews took place at a youth recreation centre, located close to the school.

The students’ activities in front of the computer were videotaped and transcribed according to a simplified version of conventions employed within conversation analysis (CA) (see the appendix). The chatting sequences were initially transcribed and analyzed in Swedish before they were translated into English.

The present analysis draws on data from an English lesson in which the students were working on a paper on traveling in the United States. This task was organized as a student-run activity, which means that it was the students who decided how to deal with the assignment. During this lesson, the students seen or heard in the examples were placed as illustrated in Figure 1.
In the analysis that follows, the main focus is on the interaction between Sabina, Malte, and Camilla. Most of the time, Sabina and Malte were seated together in front of Sabina’s computer, while Sabina was chatting online with Camilla, who was seated three meters away. Camilla was simultaneously chatting on MSN with Tina and Fanny.

In the present lesson, eleven of the eighteen students went to the computer room to search for information on the Internet. This lesson was chosen, first, because it illustrates activities that regularly occurred when the students were using computers and the teacher was out of sight. Parenthetically, it can be noted that MSN chatting was an illegitimate classroom activity, condemned by the school. Second, and most importantly, the length of the present episode allows analysis of the students’ switching between different Internet and classroom activities in their everyday life at school. During my year in the field, the present episode constituted the most extended episode of chatting within school hours without interruption from a teacher. Chatting usually appeared as brief exchanges or isolated questions to other persons located in other places in the school, or to absent students who were spending the day at home. What is unique about the present episode is the time spent on the activity and the possibility of students engaging in online activities on the Internet without supervision. Moreover, it illustrates how online nicknames were used by the students both online and offline in ways that blurred the distinction between the two arenas of communication.

What do a few sequences tell us about the everyday lives of students in school? Jackson (1990 [1968]: 177) has shown us that:

[C]onsidered singly many aspects of the classroom look trivial. And in a sense they are. It is only when their cumulative is considered that the realization of their full importance begins to emerge.
Put differently, this study can be seen as part of such cumulative work.

4. MSN Messenger

In this study of young people’s identity work, I have concentrated on the students’ MSN activities. During the school year, MSN was one of the self-initiated computer activities that occurred frequently among the girls, and this was mentioned in the interviews as something they did at home as well. MSN is a chat channel, where the user decides who is allowed to participate. To participate in an MSN conversation in this school, the user had to download a program (MSN). This requires a registration, and a ‘nickname’ that allows others to identify him/her in MSN. The next step is to create a ‘contact list’ of all potential chat partners. In order to list a person, s/he needs a confirmation from the incoming person listed. This means that the user usually has met the person before, either online or offline. The next, important step is to invite, or be invited by, someone from your contact list into a conversation. Consider also the fact that the chatter is able to decide which status to display to friends on the contact lists. The chatter can be displayed as ‘offline’, ‘out to lunch’, ‘on the phone’, ‘away’, ‘I am back soon’, or ‘busy’. It is also possible to block particular participants from the list. Moreover, one can remain visible online to just a chosen few. The chatter can also participate in several conversations online simultaneously in different MSN rooms.

The students searched the Web using Google while they chatted on MSN, read an article in a newspaper, had the Word program open, and were playing music. In short, the computer screen generated an assemblage of activities, and this occasioning of multiple activities matters when it comes to the length of pauses in the MSN conversations. Usually, the students ‘finished’ whatever they did before they switched to an incoming utterance. This raises the question of which activity is the main activity (cf. Jones 2005), a question that is important if we are to identify who are ratified participants and who are bystanders within the local participation framework (Goffman 1981). Is the main activity chatting on MSN or writing an English paper?

4.1. Displaying tags online

One of the crucial things that one has to do before starting chatting is to create an online identity, what I have called the tag. I will start by looking at the visual expression of the tag as it occurs in MSN. MSN can be seen
as a performative space where both users have to display their tags in order to communicate with others.

In this section, I will focus on two examples surrounding the tags used by Sabina and Camilla. It can be noted that the participants themselves discussed tags (cf. Example [1]), but they did not use this very term, nor did they use optional terms such as ‘nicknames’.

The tag occurs together with the word ‘says’ every time it appears on MSN (see Figure 2). At first glance, and for those who are not used to reading online chatting, Sabina’s tag may look a bit disorganized. At a second reading, it can be seen that she has written ‘Sabina’ encased in one big heart, followed by the sentence ♥ I lOvE YoOuU♥, where she plays with the spelling and letter constellation of ‘Sabina’, ‘I’, ‘love’, and ‘you’. The phenomenon of mixing small letters and capitals as well as not following standard spelling rules can recurrently be seen in the contemporary music industry as well as in online chat rooms. What is perhaps more important is that the mixing of capitals, small letters, numbers, ‘misspelling’, and spelling phonetically is a practice among those who have been called ‘hackers’ or ‘leets’, and those who pretend to be so. Thus, the use of these practices may be seen as a way to display competence in handling digital media. Playing with letters may also be seen as an example of vertical intertextuality, which can be explained as a relation between texts in different parts of time and space (Kristeva and Roudiez 1980; Fairclough 1992). In my data, this could be seen as references to pop bands, different
versions of MUDs (MOOs, MUSE, and others), hacker cultures, or to
textual talk on mobile phones (Short Message System). If we look in
more detail at Camilla’s tag (to the right), we see similarities to Sabina’s
tag, her name also being encased in a heart. The main difference is that
Camilla writes ROBIN E in the heart and not her own name. When I
ask Camilla about the tag, she tells me that Robin E is a boy with whom
she is in love. Camilla’s tag is connected to a known physical person, Ca-
milla, at the same time as it points to this person’s relation to a third per-
son (Robin E). If I knew Camilla solely from public chat rooms on the
Internet, I would probably not recognize it if she changed her tag. Ca-
milla owns the tag ROBIN E, and I know this because I am placed in
the same room as her during this sequence. This tag presents every utter-
ance by Camilla. In this way, the tag is made and remade in MSN every
time Camilla acts, at the same time as she closely connects to a person
who is not co-present in MSN.

The use of hearts can be seen as a kind of vertical intertextuality, un-
derstood in light of the fact that the girls in the present class often wrote
a boy’s name encased in a heart in their logbooks, and on their bodies, to
indicate with whom they were in love at a particular moment. Every stu-
dent in the class received a logbook when they started the school year.
This book was used as a notebook in which the students were to write
down things they had to remember. The case of two girls using hearts in
their tags shows that the heart may be used in different ways, creating dif-
ferent meanings, and that hearts are used within different activity frames
among young people. Despite the possibility of creating an identity online
that is completely different from her identities at school, Sabina instead
chooses a close connection between her tag and the person known as Sa-
bina in the classroom. Actually, this is opposite to what Camilla has done,
displaying a name in her tag that she does not use in face-to-face interac-
tion. In short, the construction of tags involves a display of knowledge.
Moreover, they are constructed with an explicit relation to a known phys-
ical body, to an offline identity in terms of a known name. Thereby the
tag as such can also be seen to involve borderwork features, bridging on-
line and offline identities.

Another aspect when reading the tag is that the writer/talker always
appears in the third person. This is not something the chatter can choose,
but it is the software that positions the writer/talker as someone other
than a first-person speaker. It is not Sabina or Camilla who is talking di-
extingly to you, but you read a report of what is said at the very moment
(‘SaAbInA says’, ‘Robin E. says’). This makes MSN a sounding box and
a mediator that is separate from the speaker or writer, which also creates
a distance between the participants. The ‘says’ preface makes the technol-
ogy visible in interaction, as a medium, where the owner of the tag is the responsible party.

In MSN, tags are signatures, which display combinations of written texts and symbols. The creation of tags seems to be similar to activities in MUDs, where participants are expected to modify themselves and their environment. The tag is a way of signaling who is to be seen as responsible for the text, at the same time as it is part of the text itself. It may be understood as an expression, in which the present person is also the absent one. The tag communicates not only the presence of Camilla, but also the presence of Robin E, and it communicates the presence of a computer-literate person. It constructs both continuity and distinctiveness, which is of importance when it comes to identifying who are ratified participants online on MSN.

4.2. Commenting on tags in the classroom

The tags can be analyzed as textual visual phenomena as above, but I will now look at how the participants themselves orient to the tags in spoken interaction. As Goffman (1981) claims, talk between two persons does not necessarily mean that what is being said is primarily meant for the other party. Sometimes we indirectly address a third party, a bystander. In the following example, I look at how tags can be used as resources for the public display of identity in the classroom and subsequently how the display of tags on MSN is made a modality of the classroom interaction.

(1) Place: computer room; participants: Sabina (S), Camilla (C)

1 S: Camilla
2 C: M:::
3 S: What a nice little name↑ you’ve got
4 C: °Yes I know°

As has been explained, every time Camilla writes something to someone on MSN, her tag pops up in front of her text. Sabina and Camilla have been chatting on MSN for almost 15 minutes when Sabina comments vocally on Camilla’s tag: ‘What a nice little name↑ you’ve got’ (line 3). This is done loud and clear, making the online tag a public affair in the classroom. If Sabina had wanted to make her comment only to Camilla, then there is reason to believe she would have used MSN, which enables private conversations. Instead, she calls for Camilla’s attention by using her offline name in the classroom (line 1). This makes it clear to everyone whom she is talking to.

The present example illustrates that tags are oriented to in the classroom, as well as in MSN. When Sabina says ‘what a nice little name↑
you’ve got’ (line 3), Camilla follows up by saying “yes I know”, displaying recognition of which name Sabina is talking about, probably knowing that her ordinary name is of no interest to the rest of the class. The tag is not and cannot be displayed in the classroom in the same way as in MSN. Despite this, Sabina uses Camilla’s tag in the classroom as part of her own identity work. She becomes someone who knows something that others in the class do not, and this is achieved through playing with the borders of the online/offline activity frames. Sabina thus challenges the borders between online and offline activities by letting something from MSN trickle out into the classroom.

Sabina moves from a private online dialogue in MSN to an offline public dialogue in the classroom. In doing so she simultaneously changes the activity frame. Apparently, her main activity is no longer taking place on MSN, but rather publicly in the classroom. Camilla acts upon Sabina’s telling by lowering her voice while saying “yes I know” (line 4), knowing that the main business is now taking place in public. It could be argued that lowering her voice is an indication that Sabina has broken what Camilla sees as an agreement of the online activity, thereby trying to recreate the border between MSN activities and classroom activities. Something from their ‘private’ communication has been brought into the public space, but Camilla does not wish to talk about it in the classroom. It seems as though she is trying to keep these two activities apart, doing borderwork between the classroom communication and the MSN communication. In this first example, the students orient to tags (borderwork phenomena). The next example also involves switching frames but the students do not explicitly orient to tags.

4.3. Switching between online and offline activities

The students were searching the Web for information; they were logged on to MSN as well as discussion pictures that they found on the Internet. The chatters were located in the same classroom (cf. Livingstone and Bober 2005), but they chose to give their voices different material status, either as textual talk that could be read, re-read, and printed, or as face-to-face communication that was visible and hearable in the computer room.

In the social landscape of the classroom, the students could be part of online chatting, classroom chatting, or both. In the following example, the students created borders between online and offline chatting, and between ratified and nonratified participants. Their switching between activities illustrates that, in the study of computer-mediated communica-
tion, there can be problems in identifying what aspect of the situation ought to be seen as the main activity (cf. Jones 2005). Rather, if it is viewed as a hybrid, it could be argued that MSN may be seen as one modality among others in the students’ interaction (cf. Coupland and Coupland 2000).

(2) Place: classroom; participants: Malte (M), Sabina (S), and Camilla (C)

1 M: Who the hell are you writing to? ((to Sabina))
2 S: WHAT DID YOU WRITE CAMILLA? hehe
3 C: What?=  
4 S: M::↑

Malte positions himself as an intervening bystander, telling us that he is not part of the online chatting, when he asks Sabina to whom she is writing (line 1). This is thus a case of crossplay (Goffman 1981) between non-ratified and ratified participants. When Sabina ignores Malte’s question and instead orients to Camilla (line 2), she shows that she is not making the online chatting accessible to Malte. This is a place to which just a few have access. Instead of bringing Malte into the activity as a ratified participant, Sabina draws attention to her communication with Camilla on MSN, creating a clear border between what is going on online and what is happening offline. When Sabina loudly and laughingly asks: ‘WHAT DID YOU WRITE CAMILLA? he he’ (line 2), she is foregrounding the accountability and agency of Camilla, but is not telling what has been written. It may be argued that Sabina’s utterance is not primarily a question indicating that she wants Camilla to explain what she wrote, but rather a rhetorical question through which she shows in the classroom space that Camilla has said something worth knowing. Camilla’s ‘What’ (line 3) makes Sabina immediately respond with ‘M::↑’ (line 4) in a way that hearably draws attention back to the online dialogue that took place on MSN. In her communication in the physical classroom space, Sabina treats Camilla as a ratified participant and Malte as a bystander like the other classmates, the researcher, and the readers of this paper. Yet Sabina’s switch of activity frame displays her MSN activities to the bystanders, indirectly including other subjects in the MSN communication of Camilla and Sabina. Who is a bystander then becomes engulfed in what is seen as the dominant activity: the classroom communication or the MSN communication. The very switching between the activity frames is part of the borderwork, where a distinction between online and offline is made and used as an interactional resource. In short, the border between those who are part of the MSN activity and those who are not is
made visible and worked on in the classroom, such that employing an MSN activity frame in the classroom both displays identity and excludes participants.

The distinction between online and offline can also be made relevant among participants that are ratified in the same activity. In my final example, I will analyze online communication between two ratified chatters: Malte and Camilla. Further on, I will highlight how online/offline rather works as a modality for some, while it involves distinct arenas for others. We will follow an online communication between Camilla and Malte that took place on MSN and in face-to-face interaction in the classroom.

In order to help the reader identify the tags on MSN and relate them to the persons in the classroom, I have chosen to write the physical person before the name used in the tag when transcribing online activities. It should be mentioned that the students concerned participated in several dialogues on MSN simultaneously, which explains the time delay as well as why the offline comments were not necessarily related to the online interaction seen in the transcription. All online interaction is presented in bold.

(3) Place: computer room and MSN; participants: Malte (M), Sabina (S), Camilla (C), Lukas (L), Eva (E), Tina (T), and Fanny (F)

1 M/SaAbInA: **It’s Malte now** ((to Camilla/Robin E))
2 M: I just wrote xxx
3 L: Xxx
4 (4)
5 M: No
6 C/Robin E: **Okay** ((to Malte/SaAbInA))
7 S: Write fast then ((to Malte))
8 Xxx: Xxx (10)
9 C: Hehe so funny ((comments to MSN dialogue))
10 Eva: °Hehe well that’s good° ((comments to MSN dialogue))
11 (3)
12 S: Hm I wrote that I was Malte’s girlfriend ((on MSN))
13 C: M::
14 (2)
15 M/SaAbInA: **Fuck you** ((to Camilla written in English))
16 Tina: Why did you write fjortisar to me? ((to Sabina))
17 xxx: Xxx
18 S: No but like yeah I’m gonna go to a disco for
19 fjortisar* yes we’re going there to bully them
20 L: You better go then ((to Sabina))
21 C/Robin E: Bugger off you fuc*ing idiot ((to Malte))
22 Sabina: Yes but I’m going to ((to Lukas))
23 (1)
24 F: Camilla (.) with this computer I can’t get into MSN:
25 C/Robin E: To Malte
* Fjortisar is a Swedish concept used by young people aged fourteen years. Fjortisar is often used in a way that implies that members of this group are not mature ‘enough’.

At the outset, Malte announces that he is entering the chatting under Sabina’s tag (SaAbInA) (line 1). It is not obvious whether it is Malte or Sabina who is making this statement. In his study of students’ use of ICQ (I seek you), Jones (2005) has documented examples of how borrowing a nickname became problematic when the users wrote something that the ‘real’ owner did not agree on. According to Jones, this is an example of how a situation, of which computer-mediated interaction is a part, is made up of layers of realities that overlap and interact with one another, which in turn affects who is seen as responsible for the online communication. The identification of who is chatting can be seen as an illustration of how online and offline are intertwined. The announcement, ‘it’s Malte now’ (line 1), tells us that it is possible to borrow or appropriate another person’s online identification and that it matters who is to be seen as responsible for the online communication. The activity frame changes when Malte uses Sabina’s tag. It is clarified that ‘SaAbInA’, in the middle of a heart, is now speaking in a different voice and Camilla accepts this change through her ‘okay’ (line 6). The tag’s visual expression remains the same, but its meaning has changed.

‘Malte/SaAbInA’ starts his chatting by using the words ‘fuck you’ (line 15). Camilla replies by writing ‘bugger off you fuc*ing idiot’ (line 21). Note that the swear word on MSN differs in that it is addressed to Camilla, which gives it another character than if it were part of an utterance related to an activity with visible bystanders. It has been argued that textual talk, like chatting, produces a feeling of intimacy that face-to-face interaction does not (e.g., Anderson 2005; Jones 2005; Jones et al. 2006). If intimacy is misused in the interaction between Malte and Camilla, then this may be an explanation for Camilla’s response. Anyway, Malte gets cut off from possible MSN dialogues with Camilla for the rest of this lesson.

Camilla’s answer to Malte’s online offense is produced in the same genre (line 21), that is, online and in terms of swear words. Whoever is using the tag ‘SaAbInA’ has in fact insulted Camilla. There are several
persons present, but she directs her utterance directly to one of them, Malte (line 25). Presumably he is seen as responsible for the utterance, as he is in command of the keyboard. MSN is treated as a prolongation of Malte, a prosthesis that increases his field of interaction (Haraway 1991).

By using the expression ‘fuck you’, Malte does not meet the expectations of how to interact in this activity. Being placed in the same room, Camilla could have confronted Malte face-to-face, but she chooses to use MSN. Why does she respond in MSN and not face-to-face? My suggestion is that by choosing the same medium for her response, she keeps the conflict out of the public gaze and creates a border between online chatting and offline interaction. In addition, by switching from English to Swedish while using the same type of rude language as Malte, she shows him that his behavior is not accepted online. By telling him off and using ‘fuc*ing idiot’, Camilla can be seen as reprimanding Malte because he has broken the local etiquette of interaction (netiquette), and the rules of behavior in MSN became visible owing to his breach. Malte’s breach of netiquette can be seen as an example of the trouble associated with not behaving in the way expected of a ratified participant. In some respect, it could be claimed that Malte acts as a ‘stranger’ in MSN. According to Bowker and Star (1999: 302), ‘strangers are those who come and stay for a while, long enough so that membership becomes a troublesome issue—they are just not nomads passing through, but people who sort of belong and sort of do not’. Malte is part of Camilla’s class, he is co-present in the classroom when he participates in MSN, but in MSN he becomes a stranger and a rule breaker. Changing activity frames means changing the situation, and related demands. In light of what is happening in the interaction between Malte and Camilla, the interaction in the classroom becomes interesting. Much of what is commented on in the classroom concerns what the students have been writing or reading on MSN. As can be seen, even students who were not ratified in MSN commented on prior MSN communication in the form of crossplay (e.g., line 20). It could be argued that the participants made the distinction ‘online/offline’ relevant in cases where they wanted to exclude someone, keep something out of the public view, or make themselves interesting (Examples [1], [2], and [3]). When Tina loudly asks ‘why did you write fjortisar to me?’, she points to something that was written in MSN (line 16), but Sabina answers the question offline (lines 18 and 19). MSN works as one modality of communication, while face-to-face talk is another. This means that the signals for changing activity frames cannot and do not need to be identified in MSN, as this is just one aspect of the situation in which co-presence is assumed.
5. Online and offline in framework and borderwork

In focusing solely on what has been called online activities, there is a risk of oversimplifying Internet activities in everyday life (Hardey 2002). Rather, we ‘need to think in terms of how people simultaneously manage multiple ways of being present and multiple levels of presence within multiple fields of interaction’ (Jones 2005: 31). This has been done in this study, where the distinction ‘online/offline’ sometimes appears as relevant in the field of interaction and sometimes not. In cases where this distinction is made, online activities are marked off from their surroundings as something happening somewhere else (Examples [2] and [3]). In the cases where activities were not framed as online/offline, MSN worked as a modality and prosthesis in the field of interaction. More precisely, computer-mediated communication was treated as one way of being present and communicating, and discussions started in MSN were often followed up in the physical space of the classroom. Computer-mediated interaction was integrated in these students’ everyday lives, not as something unusual or strange, but as something more or less taken for granted in the student group.

The present discussion on borderwork challenges a dichotomized approach, where activities are seen as either online or offline. The boundary between activity frames is not necessarily operative just by the fact that one is chatting on MSN. Chatting on MSN can work as a modality as well as face-to-face talk in the field of interaction. When a boundary between online and offline is created and used, this can be done in a way that makes the content invisible and distant to the nonratified participants, as in the case of crossplay (Examples [2] and [3]). The online activity is made public to everyone in the classroom who can be presumed to overhear, but its precise content is not accessible to nonratified participants.

Within discussions of participation frameworks (Goffman 1981), issues concerning entitlement—who is a ratified/nonratified participant—partly depend on what is seen as the dominant activity: the online or offline activity. This is in turn a phenomenon that depends on whose individual standpoint we adopt, which means that the notions of byplay and sideplay are difficult to apply in the present context. Instead, what I have called borderwork (or the very switching between online and offline activity frames) works as a resource in the communication between the students. The hybridity of activity frames destabilizes the expectations of what is supposed to happen next and the kind of positions that are offered in the different activities. The interplay of the activities illustrates how the frames can be seen as linked to other ongoing activities, and that they are fragile, unstable, and open for renegotiation. In brief, rather than merely seeing online
and offline activities as separate framings, they are seen as intertwined di-
mensions in young people’s everyday lives, where the borderwork as such
is seen as an important resource in the social life of the classroom.

The notion of tags has similarly been used to show how online and off-
line identities are created and made relevant in interaction. As has been
shown, tags are visual expressions that stand in dialogue with students’
everyday lives. In other words, the use of tags does not take place in va-
cuo, but must be seen as a social activity, where online chatting is one of
several activities in which identity work occurs.

Tags are used as identity markers, symbols that refer to particular per-
sons. The tag is related to a person, which implicates responsibility and a
history (reputation). This could be seen when Malte appropriated Sabi-
na’s tag. The tag may be seen to represent continuity, both in itself and
when it refers to a particular person, where the latter is part of creating
social relations on MSN as well as in the classroom. The tags contain
two aspects that emphasize both an individual and a dialogical character.
The first aspect concerns tags as emotional displays in which the chatter’s
emotions are made visible, for instance being in love. Emotional displays
are also accomplished in other ways, one of which is by using standardized
symbols that are part of the software for displaying feelings in written mes-
sages, so-called emoticons. The second aspect is the use of tags as compe-
tence displays that communicate the user’s competence in handling the dig-
ital technology, in particular MSN. Constructing tags, like Camilla and
Sabina have done, displays knowledge of how to handle the digital tech-
nology (the software). In creating these tags, they need to go beyond the
regular registration procedure, either by exploring the possibilities of the
software or, what I often witnessed, by listening to friends’ advice.

The relational nature of tags can be seen in how they are designed, how
they are used as textual and visual symbols and how they play with lan-
guage in computer-mediated activities as well as in face-to-face activities.
The construction of tags is accomplished in relation to persons who are
part of the situation, online and/or offline, which shows how tags are lo-
cated in the boundary zone of what is seen as private and public in class-
room life. In sum, tags are thus also features of students’ boundary work,
along with crossplay and other types of frame switches.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

? Inquiring intonation
= Contiguous utterances
: Prolonged syllable
Raising intonation
Falling intonation
(0.5) Pause 0.5 second
(.) Micro pause (shorter than 0.5 seconds)
word Stressed word
word Online utterance
*word* Quiet speech
((word)) Comments made by the researcher
WORD Loud speech
xxx Unsure transcription

Note

* For valuable comments on earlier versions of the paper, I thank Karin Aronsson, Michael Tholander, and the three referees.

References


Pål André Aarsand received his Ph.D. from the Department of Child Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. His research interest lies in discourse analysis and children’s and young people’s use of information and communication technology. In recent publications, he focuses on computer gaming among children. Address for correspondence: Department of Child Studies, Linköping University, 581 83 Linköping, Sweden <palaa@tema.liu.se>.