

Foreword

I am very pleased to write a few words for this collection of cases on collaboration in virtual learning environments. I have been involved in the research and implementation of virtual learning environments for about one and a half decades. My introduction to virtual worlds started with the seminal work of Ashok Patel in the early 90s on conceptual network based intelligent tutoring that became the basis of virtual learning modules developed under Byzantium project. Research progressed since then from standalone applications to Web-based modules for individualized learning where a large number of learners could access the modules from any parts of the world. On one hand, products for classroom management started to appear, and on the other, research progressed through incorporation of adaptive features based on content and user exploration phenomena, cognitive profiling, introduction of mobile technologies, and consideration of real-time and real-life context. Researchers started to recognize the power of collaboration and learning communities, and the whole research stream of computer supported collaborative learning emerged. Recent years have also seen a lot of interest in 3-dimensional immersive environments that take collaboration to newer heights.

Most of this progress can be attributed to the exponential advancements in technology in recent years. These rapid developments have provided ample opportunities for virtual learning environments to be inclusive, multimedia-rich, and take advantage of both asynchronous and synchronous approaches, that we take for granted in hi-fidelity face-to-face environments. However, this has fuelled, once again, the possibility of technology driving the innovation, and pedagogy struggling to catch up with that. Lack of benchmarks means it is not easy to assess whether we are moving in the right direction.

This is where this edited collection comes at the right time, with the right focus on the use of virtual learning environments. The book contains a right balance between the research innovations and their practical use, and should serve as the solid grounding not only for the creation of benchmarks for further development but also to reflect on what shifts need to be made in pedagogy so as to foster effective collaboration in virtual learning environments and exploit the innovations to their fullest. The first step is to look at the experiences of early adopters and identify best practice examples. This collection is a valuable step in that direction.

It is pleasing to see that the book provides a rich variety of cases from different walks of life, ranging from an anti-suicide website and obesity prevention to music programs and interdisciplinary collaboration, using various types of virtual environments, including 3D worlds, multiuser environments, commonly used environments such as Second Life, and specialized custom-developed platforms such as e@leader. There is an excellent balance between the discussions on designing such environments to foster collaboration and analysis of how effectively collaboration is being supported in existing environments. Thus, this collection will provide food for thought to both researchers and practitioners, who are either using the virtual learning environments already or are looking for solutions that align with their community of learners.

Virtual learning environments are being used in all sorts of educational scenarios: formal, informal and non-formal learning ranging from classroom-based instructor-led education to just-in-time, interest-focused and community-driven situations that some could argue as not directly falling under the umbrella of education as we know it. The book offers a refreshing combination of cases from these different areas, hence providing a level playing field for comparison and for synthesis of common issues within this diversity.

A notable feature of these cases is the focus on societal issues that matter, rather than getting swayed away into the discussions on how good the technology is, while still keeping at the cutting edge of technological innovations, something that I must give credit to Donna Russell, who's editing skills made it possible.

While writing this short piece of my thoughts, I am privy to Donna's overview that precedes the chapters in this book. I wholeheartedly agree with her that while the chapters in this book individually provide stories within the context of their specialized disciplines, the book captures a holistic and evaluative perspective for designers, educators and researchers who are concerned with the wider applicability of these environments and are looking for directions for future of this area of research. This excellent combination of high quality and thought-provoking cases should serve as stepping stone for others who are ready to start their journey with collaborative virtual learning environments.

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