Chapter 5

Using SmallWorlds to Enhance Social Presence, Group Cohesion, and Group Identity in an Online Postgraduate Course

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ABSTRACT

Online learning is proliferating in education, yet the establishment of social presence, development of group cohesion, and cultivation of a group identity can be particularly challenging. These three elements have a key role for a fruitful educational experience in online courses. The same time, research has shown that the use of Virtual Worlds (VWs) in educational contexts can sustain the sense of being and communicating with other people and it potentially increases group coherence and identity. In this chapter the use of a VW, SmallWorlds, for enhancing the aforementioned elements in a distance learning online master’s course is discussed. The chapter begins by providing the definitions and importance of the three elements. Next, the rationale behind the choice of SmallWorlds is explained and its main features are presented. What follows is the presentation of the key pedagogical strategies implemented and it is examined how each of these strategies contributes to the enhancement of the three elements. Lastly, a set of suggestions are offered for implementing similar activities.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is proliferating in education challenging educators to confront traditional assumptions regarding teaching and seek new methods for engaging students in the learning process. This turn of focus from face-to-face to online modes of teaching largely stems from the new norms that are imposed by a highly digital and interconnected society. Indeed, learners nowadays are accustomed to contact with people and information anytime and from anywhere through their mobile devices (Pew Research Center, 2017, Jan 12a, b), which makes them perceive traditional methods of delivery of knowledge
not only as outdated and far away from the current ways of living and accessing information, but, more importantly, as something that hinders rather than supports their learning endeavors. Subsequently, it is far from surprising that they demand greater control and flexibility as regards the when, the where, and the how they will engage in the learning process. Yet, although the shift from traditional to online delivery methods increases access to course materials and potentially provides more flexibility in the ways that students study, it should not be assumed that it is always coupled with sufficient and effective ways of interpersonal communication required to engage students in the learning process (Jaggars, 2014).

Traditionally, interaction between students and teachers in educational settings has been face-to-face, based upon the oral medium which is augmented by the facial and bodily cues of the participants. This rich type of communication enables both learners and teachers to project their individual characteristics, and subsequently enhances their engagement with the conversation. Add to that, the physical presence of students and teachers in a closed educational setting towards a common goal strengthens the bonds among members and facilitates the cultivation of a common group identity, which, again, increases their involvement with the interactions occurring into the group and their commitment to the group. In contrast, computer mediated communication is usually deprived of most, if not all, visual cues and, at the same time, participants’ sense of belonging to the group can be diminished, since it is difficult to develop interpersonal relationships with other group members.

The last decade there has been an increasing interest among educators as regards the use of Virtual Worlds (VWs) for educational activities (Duncan et al., 2012). The most prominent affordance of VWs that makes them particularly beneficial for learning, and especially for online education, is that they increase users’ sense of being and communicating with other people in an immersive environment (Cho et al., 2015). In addition, numerous research studies have shown that VWs have the potential to foster teamwork and social interaction among students (e.g., Dalgarno & Lee, 2010; Petrakou, 2010; Vasileiou & Paraskeva, 2010; among others), which in turn increases sense of group identity and strengthens group cohesion. When the levels of social presence, group identity, and group cohesion are high in a group of learners, it is highly plausible that they will actively engage in the learning activities within a course.

The primary aim of this chapter is to discuss how the use of, and the pedagogical strategies implemented in, a VW in the distance learning Master of Arts in Digital Technologies for Language Teaching programme (MA in DTLT), University of Nottingham, contributes significantly in enhancing students’ sense of social presence, strengthening group cohesion, and fostering group identity. These three elements are considered crucial for the successful implementation of the pedagogical framework of the MA in DTLT as we have presented elsewhere (Konstantinidis & Goria, 2016).

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. First, the three constructs, namely social presence, group cohesion, and group identity, that guide the discussion in this chapter are defined and their importance in online education is briefly explained. Next, the rationale behind the choice of SmallWorlds for the activities of the MA in DTLT is explained followed by a presentation of the basic features and affordances of SmallWorlds. Then, the design of the dedicated space in SmallWorlds for hosting the activities of the MA in DTLT is briefly presented. What follows is the discussion of the key pedagogical strategies implemented, which are: (a) using VWs for course meetings, (b) organising social meetings, and (c) nurturing a democratic environment, accompanied with relevant examples from the MA in DTLT. Our experience of integrating SmallWorlds in the programme generated a couple of ideas which we are eager to pursue in the future. These are listed before our suggestions for other educators who want to follow our example and wish to integrate VWs in their curriculum. The last paragraph summarises the discussion in the chapter and outlines the most important takeaways for the reader.
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