Chapter 17
Learning by Doing in 3D Environments: Collaborative Efforts in Second Life and Open Sim

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ABSTRACT

Learning by doing using 3D worlds is a relatively new approach for teachers and students. To date, a limited number of teachers have had the time or money to take university courses on this or otherwise develop in-world teaching that fully takes advantage of the unique opportunities virtual worlds offer. In this chapter, the authors will review the various virtual worlds teachers have been collaborating on to teach different subjects to different people in different languages. The authors will also detail the twists and turns they’ve encountered in their own attempts to teach together in-world. Finally, the authors will look at new developments on the horizon and how they might impact what is already happening.

INTRODUCTION

The authors have been collaborating with each other and other educators in virtual environments for nearly a decade. At times that collaboration has been very fruitful, and at other times that collaboration has been exceedingly frustrating. Although the authors have not all met in the real world, their collaboration virtually has been extensive and intensive; and, as a result, profound collegial and personal friendships
have been formed, and the authors strongly recommend that other educators work with each other and their students in virtual environments.

Since the main virtual teaching focus of the authors has been on teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and its many acronym variants (e.g., English as a Foreign Language--EFL, English Language Learning--ELL, Computer Assisted Language Learning--CALL, Vocational ESL--VESL, English for Special Purposes—ESP, Content and Language Integrated Learning--CLIL, etc.), this chapter will focus mostly on language lessons/programs that teachers have worked together on in virtual worlds.

However, some of the authors’ experiences, especially in participating in or delivering in-world teaching instruction at virtual conferences have been with educators of many other subjects. Therefore, occasionally this chapter will address a larger teaching community.

In addition to speaking of collaboration with other educators, the authors will address collaboration in terms of the tasks they favor for their students. There are many variables in how one approaches any teaching, and the authors’ preferences are for synchronous task-based lessons/games which require learners to work together to reach their goals.

After reading this chapter, the reader should have a much better appreciation of the projects teachers have been collaborating on in virtual worlds, how these efforts reflect a range of teaching approaches, the wide range of variables virtual educators must consider, possible solutions and recommendations for the types of problems that might arise, and how the future might differ from the present.

BACKGROUND

The theories and approaches related to teaching languages have gone through centuries of evolution, and each stop along the way has had some merits and drawbacks. In general, there has been a see-sawing back and forth along a continuum where one end represents very rigid, teacher-controlled lessons, and the other end represents more open-ended, student-driven lessons. Virtual world teaching can fall anywhere along that continuum depending on the people orchestrating it.

The authors of this chapter firmly believe that the best use of virtual worlds is found on the student-driven end of the continuum, but there are merits to pulling from all the approaches, and the authors have observed almost all of the approaches being used in current virtual world language teaching. Using a brief overview of the history of language teaching as a framework, this section of the chapter will analyze what has been happening in virtual worlds.

Grammar Translation Approach

In the 1700’s the Grammar Translation approach to teaching languages was vogue. Students were given grammar explanations and vocabulary lists and then told to read and translate a written text in the target language to the students’ native language (Laviosa, 2014, pp. 4-6). Since students were never asked to speak the language being studied, and some of the languages (i.e., Latin) were “dead” or unspoken languages, speaking competency was neither sought nor achieved. Of course, there is value to being able to read and translate foreign languages, but it is not surprising that a century later, the Direct Method gained favor and being able to speak in the new language was given class time.

In virtual worlds, it is not typical to see translation of texts as the sole means of instruction, but what can be found are classes that are basically book clubs where each lesson is focused around understand-
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