Chapter 18

Field Research in Second Life: Strategies for Discussion Group Facilitation and Benefits of Participation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the educational potential of discussion groups situated in three-dimensional (3D) virtual worlds. Virtual discussion groups are examined from the following perspectives: the benefits and challenges of participation and the best practices in terms of effective discussion group moderation. The authors start by describing the benefits of online discussion groups and continue by identifying strategies on how to facilitate such meetings effectively, with a focus on techniques promoting a sense of community. The authors will discuss the major themes that emerged from the content analysis of field notes, an ethnographic journal, and interviews with a discussion group member after immersion in various discussion groups in Second Life. An understanding of the communication modalities (voice and text-chat) and the principles of social interaction may help educators use virtual learning environments effectively. Guidelines for discussion group moderation are presented throughout the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Online discussion groups are a way to create social networks, share ideas, and seek advice (Ridings & Wasko, 2010). Discussions have been shown to be more effective than other methods of instruction for the goals of retention, application, problem-solving, attitude change, and motivation for future learning (McKeachie, 2002). There has been substantial research investigating specific aspects of online discussion
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groups conducted in 2D platforms and, more recently, in 3D environments, which simulate real worlds (e.g., cities, hospitals, laboratories) or imaginary worlds and offer synchronous communications using voice, text chat, and avatar-controlled gestures and movements. Most research examples in the area of discussion group settings can be located in the areas of health and education.

The social affordances of virtual worlds are of particular relevance for the investigation of online discussion and support groups. It has been suggested that social affordances enhance community building, collaboration, social interaction, and offer the possibility to observe and replicate modeled behavior (Fusar-Poli, Cortesi, & Borgwardt, 2008; Gamage, Tretiakov, & Crump, 2011; Oh & Nussli, 2014).

To understand the concept of social affordances, it is essential to clarify the meaning of ‘sense of presence’ as it relates to virtual worlds. The degree of a virtual user’s sense of presence can enhance a sense of closeness and cohesion within a virtual group and may enrich communication. It helps users of a virtual environment project themselves online and feel a sense of community (Lambert & Fisher, 2013). Immediacy, an important factor identified by Gunawardena and Zittle (1997), is inherent in synchronous discussions because all discussants are present simultaneously and exchange their thoughts in real time, which allows for immediate feedback.

Three-dimensional virtual worlds are perceived as more sociable than 2D environments, such as text-based discussion forums in learning management systems (Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas, etc.). Students namely enjoy discussions in virtual worlds, such as Second Life, because they can see their own avatar and their peers’ avatars (Mayrath, Sanchez, Traphagan, Heikes & Trivedi, 2007), whereas a linear, asynchronous 2D discussion board may not offer a similar degree of immediacy, sense of presence, or sense of community. Although 2D environments can provide more time for participants to reflect on the topics discussed, we live in an age where learners prefer instant reaction from each other. To address this need for immediacy, some areas in virtual worlds offer a high degree of social interaction (Firat & Kabakci Yurdakul, 2011).

In addition to feeling an increased sense of presence, the elimination of barriers to social participation is another benefit of having social interaction in virtual worlds (Stendal, Balandin, & Molka-Danielsen, 2011), which may ultimately increase the quality of life of some groups of users. For example, synchronous virtual social interaction may be beneficial for distance learners who do not have the opportunity to meet in person (Annetta, Murray, Gull Laird, Bohr, & Park, 2008), for individuals with physical impairments who cannot travel to participate in a face-to-face discussion group or support meeting, or individuals with social skills challenges, such as, individuals with autism who may feel more comfortable interacting through computers (Fusar-Poli et al., 2008).

The objective of this chapter is to gain insight into the way online discussion and support groups in 3D virtual worlds have been used recently. The first part of this chapter provides an overview of studies exploring online communication patterns and, more specifically, discussions conducted in 3D environments, including benefits and challenges of participation. In the second part, the authors describe their own field research conducted in Second Life. The benefits and challenges of participation will be discussed in detail with reference to the field notes and the interview data. Throughout the chapter, the authors will present and discuss guidelines for the effective moderation of virtual discussions. The authors will also make the connection to learning in virtual worlds and include examples how the discussion group format has been implemented to promote learning.