Chapter 11

The Learners’ Isle: A Multi-User Virtual Environment to Foster Learner Agency and Motivation

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ABSTRACT

The multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) described in this chapter is aimed to promote learner agency and motivation by engaging students in authentic and challenging learning experiences aligned with educational goals to foster twenty-first century competencies. Principles of assessment for learning (AfL) and gamification will be integrated to design a MUVE governed by students. The students will engage in learning, assessment, and instruction-related activities. They will also initiate, manage, and monitor the activities. The relationship between The Learners’ Isle virtual environment and the physical classroom environment will be complementary and reciprocal. The teacher (a digital immigrant) and the students (the digital natives) will be partners in the teaching-learning process. The design principles of The Learners’ Isle, a scenario to illustrate blended learning, and its conceptualization through an activity theory framework will be presented. In addition, this chapter will discuss the educational context characteristics conducive to successful implementation of the MUVE.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written since the mid-80’s about the incongruence between goals of education in the knowledge age and prevalent traditional practices of instruction, learning, and assessment. Such practices are consistent with the teaching-focused paradigm (Kember, 1997) according to which the teacher imparts discrete chunks of knowledge and uses summative assessment to measure the extent to which the students recall them. Such practices were congruent with the goals of education in the industrial age that aimed at preparing workers for the production line. But they are not suitable for achieving the
current goals of education, which are adapted to the rapid renewal of knowledge and its complexity. Successful functioning in the knowledge society requires nurturing the 21st century skills (Binkley et al., 2012; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003) for preparing students to become lifelong learners. Hence the shift in paradigm from teaching-focused to learning-focused (Barr & Tagg, 1995). According to the latter, the teacher assumes the role of a guide or a manager of a knowledge-construction site (Biggs, 1999), the students are active participants in their learning, and the assessment becomes an integral part of the teaching-learning process and informs decisions made during its navigation (Birenbaum, 1996; Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Although the 21st century skills have been defined operatively along with suitable instruction and assessment practices, their implementation is challenging (Voogt, Erstad, Dede, & Mishra, 2013). One obstacle lies in students’ low motivation and inadequate skills to engage in deep learning and become agentic learners (Ferguson, Phillips, Rowley, & Friedlander, 2015; Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). The current chapter describes a MUVE that aims to tackle the obstacle. It combines principles of assessment for learning (AfL)–a pedagogical approach consistent with the learning-centered paradigm–with principles of gamification–a gameful approach to learning–in order to foster learner agency and motivation to enact it.

The chapter comprises three parts. The first presents a brief account of the main constructs, which highlights the potential of AfL and gamification to promote learner agency and motivation. The second part introduces the guiding principles of the proposed MUVE and describes its features. Next, it presents a hypothetical scenario of blended learning between the MUVE and the classroom and its conceptualization through an activity theory framework. The last part includes suggestions for implementing the MUVE and concluding remarks.

Learner Agency

Agency is a multi-faceted, situated and relational phenomenon (Rajala, Martin, & Kumpulainen, 2016). It refers to one’s capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative (Ferguson et al., 2015). To be agentic is “to intentionally make things happen by one’s actions” (Bandura, 2001, p. 2).

As a psychological construct, agency embodies belief systems, self-regulation, and a variety of structures or functions through which personal influence is actualized (Bandura, 2001). It is thus closely related to autonomy and to power relations in human activity (Rajala et al., 2016). Self-efficacy—the faith in one’s ability to succeed in achieving one’s goals—is a key element of agency (Bandura, 1997). Other factors associated with learner agency include conception of intelligence as a growing entity (Dweck, 2006), consciousness, mastery orientation, and future orientation (Ferguson et al., 2015).

Although agency refers to both, the capacity and the willingness to take action, classroom observations show that a student may be agentic in a different way in the activity that develops in two groups or learning sites as evident from their interest and engagement with the work (Siry, Wilmes, & Haus, 2016). Moreover, agentic students under certain circumstances may choose not to enact their agency. The current chapter therefore differentiates between the capacity to take action and the willingness or motivation to exercise it.

From a sociological perspective, agency is the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). Such capacity is constructed in social interactions using mediating structures (Sewell, 1992). Structures are constituted by cultural rules (or schemas) and resources that mutually imply and sustain each other over time (Giddens, 1979; Sewell, 1992). Schemas are generalizable procedures applied in a variety of interactions (Sewell, 1992). In classroom contexts, they may refer to types of curriculum,