Chapter 13

In a Virtual Classroom, Who Has a “Voice”:
A Discourse Analysis of Student–Instructor Interactions in Two Second Life-Based Courses

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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature argues that educational initiatives that take place in three-dimensional virtual worlds such as Second Life (SL) enable students to construct their knowledge and take ownership for their learning. The notion of a more student-centered learning environment is not new; in fact, similar claims were made about text-based MUD environments and to some extent, educational chat spaces. This study is an attempt to more rigorously examine some of the claims made about the democratic nature of communication in virtual worlds such as SL and the potential for these electronic spaces beyond social exchanges. The findings support the notion that deep learning is possible in virtual worlds using synchronous text chat. However, evidence to suggest that the structure of the educational activities is student-centered is lacking. Contrary to the claims, instructional activities used in the SL courses under investigation relied heavily on a teacher-centered model.

INTRODUCTION

Today’s young people are thought to be prolific and proficient users of technology. A common stereotype of the tech-savvy student is of an individual who is adept at multi-tasking both offline and online and who is constantly connected – always in touch – anytime, anyplace. When asked to describe their physical classroom experiences, Prenksy (2001) claims that these students often respond using words such as “boring” and “dry.” According to Edwards, Watson, Nash, and Farrell (2005), the passive “shovelware” approach to instruction with its emphasis on quantity rather than quality is no longer tolerable to these students. Moreover, there are scholars who suggest that information technology is reshaping the
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mindset of students (e.g., Dede, 2005; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001). Some educators such as Cross (2007) also believe that alternatives to rote learning techniques, which are viewed as a form of punishment, are needed.

In an attempt to make teaching and learning activities more appealing to these students, educators are examining ways to integrate new technologies into the curriculum. Advocates of this approach suggest that there are benefits to the interactions that take place within visually rich, complex virtual worlds, like Second Life (SL); however, there is little research to support these assertions. In fact, decisions to move educational initiatives into these game-like environments appear to be made on the basis of “leaps of faith” rather than on empirical evidence (Hays, 2005, p. 9). Further, the data indicate that as of November 2008, just over 41% of the residents in SL were female, and approximately 59% were male (Linden Lab, 2008). Ondrejka (2008) interprets these numbers as suggesting that the gender balance in SL is approximately equal. Even though there are a number of females visiting SL, there are some scholars who question the female-friendliness of this space (e.g., Wajcman, 2007). And an unfriendly learning environment could impact the learning potential of the students.

Librarians are leading the way in conducting and promoting educational activities in virtual worlds, and currently, there are more than 400 in SL (Abram, 2007). Creating a library in SL and other virtual worlds is one way to reach out to and meet the needs of members of that community (Erdman, 2007). Further, Erdman argues that the avatar representation gives “a face to a virtual librarian who can gesture and walk the users to the resources found in-world” (p. 35). Because many of the librarians behind these virtual world programs are early adopters, their work often serves as a model for other educational groups within SL (Arreguin, 2007). Librarians also play a central role in the pedagogical uses of virtual environments for learning and are at the forefront of the information literacy movement (Alexander, 2008).

One example of librarian-led educational initiatives can be seen in a joint effort between a library system and a research university’s continuing education program, both located in the Midwest region of the United States. Together they offer a series of non-credit courses about virtual worlds. The courses cover a broad range of topics such as Second Life 101, setting up an educational presence in virtual worlds, basic scripting skills, and machinima. These SL-based courses are designed for librarians, educators, and others interested in providing alternative forms of library services and educational programs. They are offered for a fee – between approximately $100 and $300 per course – and individuals from around the world enroll in and attend these sessions. Because the sessions are held in an open air auditorium, non-student “visitors” may inadvertently show up for class, as well.

Courses conducted by the educators and librarians in SL share certain characteristics. First, students and instructors sit at their own computers. It is in the virtual space where they bring together multiple experiences and diverse levels of expertise. SL residents create the content and navigate the environment through an avatar (i.e., a digital, graphic character) that is “known” by its SL name, which is a unique in-world identity. Communication is conducted through synchronous and asynchronous modes. In SL, text and audio chat are used for group discussions, whereas instant messaging (IM) is available for more private conversations. One advantage of using the text chat or IM modes of communication for student-instructor course interactions in SL is that the system records them for free. Transcripts of these sessions are available for students and instructors to review at a later time.

Graphical three-dimensional virtual worlds are relatively new. For example, SL was released to the public by Linden Lab in 2003 and is the largest three-dimensional virtual world (EDUCAUSE