Chapter 9

Analyzing the Design of Telecollaboration in Second Life using Activity Theory

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, Second Life (SL) has in recent years become accepted as a platform for innovative educational activities at many universities. One such activity includes ways of enabling students coming in contact with other students in so-called telecollaboration. Using an Activity Theoretical model, the present case study describes the design and initial implementation of a telecollaborative learning activity between four universities in Second Life. The four student groups were all attending quite different programs and the main challenges encountered were that of accommodating the different needs taking the diverse motivational objectives of each group into account, and making use of affordances the tool (SL) in this pursuit.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet, and more specifically, social software such as virtual worlds, have greatly contributed to global communication over the last decade. In language learning, in particular, this development presents new exciting possibilities. Increased access to digital technologies has meant that online tools such as e-mail, online discussion forums, blogs, wikis, and more recently virtual 3D platforms such as Second Life (SL), are increasingly being used in education to bring students together. 3D worlds, in particular, offer spaces where genuine communicative acts can take place at a distance, simulating real world activity, but with the advantage that they allow learners from differ-
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ent geographical locations to meet in meaningful authentic communication using the target language in an immersive, 3D, common and open space.

One of the traditional challenges in language education has been to provide meaningful contexts where you can use the target language in an authentic setting. Most language educators would agree that one of the most significant triggers of motivation in learning a foreign language is the yearning to communicate via the language, but this is often difficult to achieve in a traditional classroom and/or online setting and communication often becomes “make-believe”; second language learners are forced into constructed, artificial communicative situations on more or less relevant topics, where they can easily revert to their mother tongue. Consequently, the need and wish to communicate, one of the main motivational forces for language learning, is not being exploited. In bringing together learners from different language backgrounds, online environments, such as SL, increase the scope for cross-cultural interaction where the target language is the only viable option for meaningful communication. The nature of the communicative environment is important in this respect. Spontaneous conversations are often triggered by the surrounding environment in real life; we generally initiate small talk with strangers by talking about the weather, what people are wearing, or by commenting what we see around us, and in this way the environment becomes a cue for contact. Simulating this in online situations is often difficult, but here virtual worlds can offer a good alternative. If, in addition, collaborative tasks are designed in such a way that the information needed is contained in the knowledge capital of the student group so that the students themselves become the source of the course content, two of the potential problems related to second language learning situations are addressed: motivation for using the foreign language and subject relevance.

There are further advantages with using virtual worlds for this type of activity: they are environments with which many students are familiar with from their leisure activities and in this sense provide a common cultural reference; they are generally equipped with a range of tools for communication such as chat, instant messaging and voice; they are open environments allowing for organised as well as spontaneous meetings and, they are 3D environments, where the physical setting in combination with the avatar affordances can be used to scaffold the language learning experience. Virtual worlds in language education can thus go towards answering needs claims made by researchers such as Warschauer (1997, p. 487) who “demands” that students be given the opportunity to “conduct actively ‘meaningful tasks and solve meaningful problems in an environment that reflects their own personal interests as well as the multiple purposes to which their knowledge will be put in the future’”.

However, conducting this type of international collaboration in a virtual world environment within the framework of institutional organisations and curricula, which are often very rigid, is not easy. Apart from the fact that the integration of different curricular goals in a common activity is a challenge in itself, the technical, mental and cultural hurdles of doing it in a virtual world, a technically complex environment unfamiliar to many educators (and some students), adds to this challenge. As an illustrative example we have for instance noted that many educators (and indeed some students) find it hard to relate to the idea that virtual worlds can be used in serious educational contexts as they are so closely associated with leisure activities. Thus, in order to foresee and meet potential difficulties along the way we need relevant tools. Activity Theory is one example of such a tool, and in this study it is used as a theoretical lens and conceptual framework to identify and analyze the design of telecollaborative language learning activities built up under the AVALON project framework. More specifically, one case study offered in SL as the activity of study is examined in detail: a debating course offered under the project.
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