INTRODUCTION

Presence Pedagogy (P2) codifies an approach to teaching and learning designed to capitalize on social affordances of tools such as virtual worlds (Bronack et al., 2008). Based on ten years of experience teaching in immersive environments such as ActiveWorlds, Teleplace, and Opensim, this framework was developed to offer a novel perspective concerning which teaching practices are more likely than others to foster the development of reflective communities of practice that support all learners involved. The novel role presence plays in this model has enabled the manifestation of instructional practices in spaces like virtual worlds that otherwise are difficult or impossible to employ. In much the same way, we contend that presence-based research practices also may lead to novel ways to frame, investigate, and report on phenomena embedded within immersive worlds.

In one sense, the P2 model offers a set of principles developed over the years through trial, error, reflection, and adjustment. As described more fully below, many of these principles have long histories and reflect universal assumptions about their facility. Other principles of the P2 model, however, may seem counterintuitive to seasoned teachers who are well-steeped in traditional approaches. Either way, one thing is clear: the P2 model was designed initially as a guide for considering the praxis of teaching, with a bias toward collaborative activity and public reflection. In this capacity, the P2 framework has proven most helpful when considering: (a) how to design effective online learning spaces, (b) how to adjust teaching praxis when moving from a traditional medium to an emergent one, and (c) how to facilitate meaningful learning interactions among students and teachers who experience each other through mediated identities.

In another sense, the P2 framework provides a solid base for evaluating the quality of...
educational experiences in these environments, as well. Too often, we hamstring ourselves when considering the effectiveness of innovations by judging their value using assessment and evaluation models ill-suited to reflecting accurately any change that may have occurred. That is, we accept that changing the way we do something is a reasonable approach to achieving new results; however, we generally are more reticent when asked to consider a change in the way we investigate, measure, and value these results.

For good reason, mind you.

As Guba and Lincoln (1981) note, evaluation is critical to the effective judgment of worth. Useful evaluation is more than an accurate assessment of what we have done; it also serves as a hopeful measure of what we are striving to become. As such, the frameworks we use to investigate phenomena and to value behaviors work best when they reflect accurately both the ways in which things come to be and the ways we envision them manifesting in the future. This is the lens through which we now will re-examine the drivers behind our P2 tenets, with the goal of adding to the foundation for investigating praxis in these new worlds for learning.

PRESENCE

Presence, or, the sense of “being there,” is a critical attribute of effective immersive technologies such as virtual worlds. Through the use of avatars—that is, robust digital representations of our corporeal selves—we can both project ourselves into synthetic, immersive spaces and also sense the real presence of others within these spaces, as well. The ability to sense the digital presence of others in environments such as virtual worlds, serious games, and simulations reintroduces the concept of social facilitation into our online endeavors in ways that we have relied upon in traditional spaces, but have been difficult or impossible to utilize in web-based ones.

Some (Kamada et al., 2005; Gunawardena, 1995) suggest a direct relationship exists between a medium’s capacity to support a sense of presence and the ability of those using that medium to utilize both verbal and non-verbal social cues to communicate and to collaborate effectively. Others suggest differentiated performance based on the presence of others is much more complex. For example, Aiello and Douthitt (2001) offer a review of research that suggests people perform better on simple tasks—and less well on complex ones—in the presence of others. Park and Cantrambone (2007) were able to replicate the social facilitation effect not only with “physical humans,” but also with avatars. Indeed, they note that the social facilitation conundrum likely is as present with “virtual humans” as it has been reported in traditional, physical spaces.

These results suggest that people behave differently when in the presence of others versus when they are alone, and that these behavioral differences are similar regardless of whether the “others” are present physically or virtually. They also suggest that constructs we rely upon to measure and judge effectiveness in the physical world may also be available to us in our virtual ones.

TENETS OF PRESENCE PEDAGOGY: AN AVAGOGIST VIEW

From a practical view, presence manifests itself in many ways, but none perhaps more important than in the form of instructional presence. Garrison et al. (2000) define instructional presence along three dimensions: 1) discourse, 2) design, and 3) direction. Table 1 provides some examples of how P2 attempts explicitly to integrate instructional presence across these dimensions and into the formal instructional planning process.

If “pedagogy” (Banilower et al., 2006) is the process through which a teacher manages an instructional environment, and “andragogy” (Knowles, 1980) is the process of extending these principles to adults, then we suggest avagogy is the set of skills, dispositions, strategies, and styles instructors employ, via their
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If the Gear Fits, Spin It!: Embodied Education and in-Game Assessments
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