Chapter 19
Higher Education in a Virtual World

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ABSTRACT
Following years of discussion surrounding the characteristics, both positive and negative, of generations X and Y, we are seeing the emergence of what is referred to as the virtual generation, the net generation, or Generation V. To some, the virtual generation includes 15 to 24 year olds who spend significant amounts of time playing video games, browsing the Web, and communicating over the Internet (Proserpio & Gioia, 2007). Tapscott (2009) defines the net generation as the first generation to have grown up in the digital age. To others, Generation V is a generation that transcends age, gender, social demographic, and geography, and encompasses everyone who participates in a virtual environment (Sarner, 2008). Regardless of the exact parameters of the generation in use, as the virtual generation enters our academic institutions en masse, we need to ensure that we are providing educational environments that encompass the technological world in which they live, that defines who they are. Rather than requiring them to be confined solely to traditional lecture-based pedagogy, let the virtual generation learn in a virtual world.

INTRODUCTION
While the term virtual generation refers to individuals who are comfortable in an online environment, within that online environment it is possible to go beyond gathering and distributing information and goods over the internet and venture into a myriad of virtual worlds. Virtual world, alternate gaming reality (ARG), and massive multiplayer online game (MMOG) are all terms used to describe online environments in which real people, represented by avatars, interact in real-time. These environments are more broadly known as metaverses. Some metaverses are completely open to users, such as the virtual worlds Second Life and Entropia Universe, and interaction occurs for social, cultural, and information-seeking reasons.
Users have the ability to shape the landscape of the world themselves, creating lands, homes, and businesses. Other metaverses exert control over the users, such as the MMOGs Everquest and World of Warcraft, with specified tasks to complete, problems to be solved, goals to be met, and winners and losers. In all metaverses activity continues even when an individual member is offline, which increases the draw of the community to the members.

Virtual worlds have been gaining in popularity since the launch of Second Life in 2003, and are beginning to be seen as innovative new learning environments. Users of Second Life value the ability to interact with people and information resources at the same time within a virtual world (Ostrander, 2008). Although the internet generally holds vast amounts of information that users can access, virtual worlds go one step further and allow for real-time discussion about that information, visual inspection of three-dimensional cultural artifacts, buildings, and events, and the opportunity to learn through watching others learn. Virtual worlds also facilitate learning by allowing users to engage in activities and behaviours that have observable outcomes in an environment in which the effects of mistakes or wrong decisions can be experienced, but without the tangible repercussions that would take place in the real world.

The extent to which virtual technologies are embedded in the lives of the average university student, combined with the breadth in age of the virtual generation and the potential educational benefits of learning in a virtual world, calls out for higher education institutions and instructors to make use of these burgeoning technologies. To ensure a full understanding of the potential uses, benefits, concerns, and outcomes of learning in a virtual world we have undertaken an analysis of the opportunities provided by virtual worlds and their associated technologies in conjunction with the current literature on learning theory and teaching strategies. As any pedagogical technique can only be as effective as the quality of its implementation, we also discuss some of the factors that need to be taken into consideration when designing and implementing a virtual learning environment. Throughout the chapter we use examples from actual virtual world implementations to illustrate clearly our thoughts, observations, and discussions.

TEACHING THE VIRTUAL GENERATION

The days of post-secondary students accepting that sitting in seats and frantically taking notes, while being lectured to by professors, constitutes a valuable education have ended (Tapscott, 2009). Students of the virtual generation want to learn through teaching strategies that emphasize interaction, technology, experience, and activity (Zeliff, 2004), and they want entertainment and play to be part of their education and work (Tapscott, 2009). As a generation they believe more strongly in a meritocratic environment than preceding generations, and they place great value on collaboration and sharing, as can be seen by the success of open-source technologies such as Linux (Sarner, 2008). Student-centered learning, in which students take an active role in their education and instructors become both learning facilitators as well as content deliverers (Shrivastava, 1999), has emerged in the forefront of education. High levels of exchange, including the free exchange of ideas and opinions among and between students and instructors, have been linked to increased levels of motivation, positive attitudes toward learning, and lasting learning outcomes (Brower, 2003; Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006).

Teaching strategies that emphasize interaction and experience over instructor-based content delivery have been developed and refined over the previous two to three decades. Among the most prevalent of these is experiential learning. When individuals undertake experiential learning they
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