Chapter 13

Assessment in Virtual Learning Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how assessment spaces must change in response to the rapid development and uptake of new virtual learning spaces. Students are engaging in collaborative, cooperative learning activities in a spatially distributed environment, yet their assessment tasks are often delivered in traditional assessment spaces that bear little resemblance to their learning spaces. The assessment of students in virtual worlds, virtual laboratories, role-plays and serious games is examined and the case is presented for the wider use of evidence-centered assessment designs and stealth assessment techniques.

TEACHING, LEARNING, ASSESSMENT AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Introduction

Setting authentic and meaningful learning activities for students requires imagination, reflection and time; the same is true for setting meaningful assessment tasks. As teachers’ epistemologies for learning and assessment are closely related, we would expect deeply held beliefs around what constitutes acceptable teaching practice to influence teachers’ approaches to designing assessment tasks. It is likely that approaches to teaching that are based on the routine delivery of information will lead to the design of routine assessment tasks that reward recall; similarly, teachers who prepare imaginative learning activities for students are likely to find ways to make the related assessment tasks more imaginative.
The spaces within which educational practices are conducted will have a significant impact on approaches to learning, teaching and assessment (Figure 1). At the centre of all educational practice is the student experience; this is influenced by the teaching, learning and assessment activities that form the educational space (Havnes, 2004). Figure 1 emphasises that educational practices, for teachers and students, develop from a complex, synergistic relationship between the teaching, learning and assessment spaces. The student experience should be the centre of this synergistic relationship; teachers need to reflect on the impact that their teaching and assessment spaces, both physical and virtual, will have on students’ approaches to learning. The alignment between assessment, learning and teaching will only occur in a space that has been appropriately designed to accentuate synergies between these three key components of the educational environment. Teachers’ educational practices involve the reification of their underlying values associated with both virtual and physical teaching spaces; teachers and students require a space within which they co-construct their educational practices through meaningful interactions with each other and the concepts to be covered during a course.

This chapter will be examining assessment in virtual learning and teaching spaces: these spaces are realised through the use of computers and mobile digital devices. Although the examples presented throughout this chapter relate to digital environments, the principles for aligning assessment spaces with teaching and learning spaces apply equally well to physical spaces where teachers and students interact through haptic experiences. As digital resources become more sophisticated and more ubiquitous, we will see the blending of virtual and physical spaces; such spaces are already being realised through the emergence of augmented reality (Zhou, Duh & Billinghurst, 2008). This chapter will concentrate on the alignment of learning, teaching and assessment in the online spaces that are currently being used in educational institutions.

**Approaches to Assessment**

Assessment tasks are set in order to satisfy a diverse range of needs; this means that setting meaningful assessment tasks is a complex process involving “planning, discussion, consensus building, reflection, measuring, analyzing, and improving based on the data and artefacts gathered about a learning objective” (Ramakishnan & Ramadoss, 2004).
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