Exploring Identity and Citizenship in a Virtual World

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology is able to modify deep-rooted views (Martin & Vallance, 2008) and facilitate identity articulation (Bers, 2001). During adolescence young people are developing their personal identity framed through the context of family, friends and cultural and religious inheritance. The complex dynamics between ‘self,’ upbringing, cultural background, religious belief and social context may produce a sense of acceptance and welcome, feelings social engagement, or lead to anomie, social rejection, personal failure, disaffection or radicalisation. In multicultural, pluralistic democracies the emergence of trans-national political structures and the rise of international tensions have increased concerns about the nature of, and entitlement to, citizenship. This paper describes the Citizenship Project’s virtual world study of identity development in young people, using real-world scenarios to discover what values underpin engagement with political issues and citizenship, how they receive the concerns and values of others and how virtual worlds can promote social inclusion and cohesion.

Keywords: Citizenship, Education, Experiential Learning, Identity, Virtual Worlds

INTRODUCTION

During adolescence young people are particularly focused on and engaged in the exploration of identity (Erikson, 1950) and in many developed countries now enjoy easy access to social networking and other portable communal technologies which they use in their everyday lives to interact intensely with a digital social world. In these contexts young people are able to use increasingly high definition, 3D immersive and multi-media rich virtual spaces to interact and explore their relationships with a wide range of environments, contexts and other individuals, both physical and virtual. Prior work has shown how such environments can facilitate the exploration of cultural and personal values for their virtual citizens (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Bisaillon, 1989; Bers & Urrea, 2000) and some studies have concentrated explicitly on the value of multi-user environments and collaborative virtual discussion spaces (e.g., Bruckman, 1998) to show that constructionist approaches maximise the learning, content production and creative expression produced by individuals in such learning communities. In contrast to the experiences of young people online, schools are not generally able to afford access to a comparably rich resource of material and conceptual tools to support the development of workable identity prototypes and roles (Erikson, 1950; Independent, 2006). The development of digital environments therefore poses a challenge to
the historical role of education in socialising emerging adults into the contemporary world where relationships between individuals and their social identity are no longer dominated exclusively by traditional anchors in their immediate nation, culture, religion or family and are increasingly challenged and pluralistic.

The Citizenship Project (‘What Citizenship do we want?’ http://tinyurl.com/a3jexn6) is developing an immersive virtual artefact and methodology for use in educational settings to help young people in their exploration and development of cultural and citizenship identity for an inclusive society. It draws upon technologies known to be attractive to young people, many of whom routinely use similar digital environments such as online social networking to develop and maintain relationships, communicate with others and (re)present themselves. The project allows young people to explore their own values and practice citizenship in a safe environment that, whilst virtual, represents real-world contexts dealing with issues of relevance to them, their lives and their development into full citizenship in the physical world.

This paper sets out the educational and political contexts within which traditional conceptions of identity and citizenship socialisation processes operate and are being increasingly challenged by the growth of social and immersive digital media, globalisation and the changing political dynamics in many countries. The tools and methodology of the project, together with initial findings from the north east of England are presented in light of these developments and some implications for the use of immersive virtual worlds for citizenship, education, development and exploration are suggested.

IDENTITY, CITIZENSHIP, AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

The concept of citizenship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tended to be characterised in terms of nation-building and military service. Citizenship has tended to be something claimed by nation states as their exclusive property, although this is now becoming increasingly problematic in a more globalised world that challenges the autonomy of states. The pivotal role of citizenship is that it provides a strong legitimising identity for civic and political activity but it also implies duties and obligations as well as rights and is differentiated from associated concepts such as subject-hood because it encompasses an ethic of participation and involves the promotion of the autonomous individual capable of self-governance. Citizenship therefore acquires meaning only when articulated within the wider cultural context of the group. Governance, on the other hand, is about the distribution of resources and the need to create and maintain social order. The use of violence by a nation state or political entity against its citizens represents a failure of politics as a means to achieve and sustain such consensual governance.

The idea of citizenship is therefore contingent and inherently contested because it finds different expression in particular social and political contexts. It also competes for priority with other elements of identity which may be equally important to the individual and which may at times be in tension with it. Individuals do not always define themselves exclusively through any single part of their identity, such as race, cultural heritage, geographic location, religion, political allegiance, socio-economic status and so on and cannot therefore always be so defined.

An important assumption within educational systems and citizenship development in pluralistic democracies is that individuals and groups can understand the experiences of other individuals and groups. Some have argued that loyalty to a constitutional patriotism should therefore generate a sense of loyalty and obligation, rather than discrete elements of identity such as cultural ties (Habermas, 1994). However, historically the response of groups that see themselves as oppressed has often been to strive for separatism, as the obverse of discrimination, which has sometimes led to constructive activ-
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