Avatar-Based Coaching: Using Virtual World to Develop Sales Skills and Learning Satisfaction Among Business Secondary School Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the effect of using avatar-based coaching as an instructional approach through virtual world to develop selling skills and learning satisfaction among business secondary school students in Egypt. It also seeks to examine how second life virtual learning objects can increase the probability of mastering selling skills among students. The proposed instructional approach is based on the principles of cognitive, constructive and connective learning theories. A one-group pretest-posttest design is utilized in this paper to test the effect of the new instructional approach on developing selling skills and learning satisfaction among a convenience sample of 23 commercial secondary school students. The findings of this paper revealed that the use of avatar-based coaching through second life learning objects has a significance effect on participants’ selling skills and learning satisfaction. The results of this paper supported the effectiveness of avatar-based coaching in developing selling skills. This can extend to skills and knowledge relevant to other areas of business such as decision making and negotiation skills. The business training sector may also apply this new approach in the training of employers and employees for better value and better results in all kinds of organizations.

Keywords: Avatar-based Coaching, Business Education, Instructional Approaches, Sales Skills, Web-based Learning

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Business education has long been facing paradigm shifts. These shifts occur because of the importance of business education in enlightening people to become knowledgeable consumers, investors and citizens. Shifts occur when (1) difficulties in the functioning of existing paradigms, that cannot be handled adequately, emerge, and/or (2) there is an alternative paradigm that is more viable and more effective.

One of the major challenges that business education is facing nowadays is the changing job requirements and environments which depend heavily on computer technology, Web solutions and Internet applications. There is an increasing demand for employees who are well-educated and able to make use of Web solutions and Internet applications in doing most of their job

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tasks (Corconran, Laura, Daniel, & Mark, 1995). For example, individuals working in selling and marketing should know how to attract customers and make deals with them via e-marketing websites. This entails specific skills in decision making, etiquette, interpersonal communication, negotiation, oral communication, problem formulation, risk taking, teamwork, and time management (Dacko, 2006).

There are many applications and tools in the virtual world that can be used to develop knowledge and skills of selling. In their study, Waller & Holland (2009) concluded that virtual tools can guide organizations through the process of mapping and measuring skills and targeting skill gaps. Role modeling is another application of virtual world. Role modeling is a valuable application because it makes salespeople able to emulate the work habits, positive attitudes and goals of their managers, and not simply willing to go the “extra-mile” if their supervisors are not willing to do the same (Rich, 1998).

Virtual learning began with a poor pedagogical model of e-learning, based on a behaviorist and page-turning approach to learning. The reality is that virtual learning is becoming integrated into portals and work flows, even though it is not necessarily labeled as e-learning. The lines are increasingly blurred between learning and working, and many aspects of learning that occur online are not designed and measured as such (Driscoll, 2008). The National Research Council (NRC) has also reported that there are five ways that the Web and the Internet can be used to help meet the challenges of establishing effective learning environments (NRC, 2001, p. 243):

1. Bringing real-world problems into classroom through the use of videos, demonstrations, simulations, and Internet connections to concrete data and working scientists.
2. Providing “scaffolding” support to augment what learners can do and explain about their path to understanding. Scaffolding allows learners to participate in complex cognitive performances, such as scientific visualization and model-based learning, which is more difficult or impossible without technical support.
3. Increasing opportunities for learners to receive feedback from software tutors, teachers, and peers; to engage in reflection on their own learning processes; and to receive guidance toward progressive revisions that improve their learning and reasoning.
4. Building local and global communities of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other interested learners or groups.
5. Expanding opportunities for teachers’ learning.

The interactivity concept is converting the virtual learning environment into an adaptive and effective learning environment. According to the National Research Council (NRC), effective learning environments consist of four basic components: (a) knowledge-centered, wherein the emphasis is on understanding rather than remembering; (b) learner-centered, wherein individual learners’ personal and cultural backgrounds and learning styles are valued; (c) community-centered, wherein learning activities are collaborative and conducive to a community of practice and inquiry that involves legitimate peripheral participation; and (d) assessment-centered, wherein formative assessment is used to make students’ thinking visible to them and evaluations are performance-oriented (Rhodes, 2011, p. 2).

These four characteristics of effective learning environments can be used as basic elements of any instructional approach for virtual-world-based learning. In virtual world, learners and teachers can actively create, use and re-use learning objects through avatar interaction and coaching, where their presence is created and enhanced (Loureiro & Bettencourt, 2010). Based on what was mentioned above, the current study focuses on virtual tools as an emerging instructional approach that has the potential to create rich sense of presence, role modeling and coaching to develop sales skills.
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