

Chapter 3

Online Identities in Virtual Worlds

Andrew Power

Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Ireland

Gráinne Kirwan

Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Online identities need not reflect the true identity of the user. Relatively little is known about the use of online identities during e-learning and blended learning programmes, and if these reflect the students' true self. Online identities may impact on student achievement and satisfaction and as such are an important consideration for educators. Following an overview of the relevant literature regarding online identities, this paper describes findings from a survey of students currently engaged in a programme delivered using these techniques and where an awareness of online identities is to the fore. Several strengths and weaknesses of online identities in education are identified, and while students generally felt that they were portraying their own true identity online, many felt that others in the group were not. Implications for practice are described.

INTRODUCTION

Online teaching and learning offers both opportunity and danger. It can offer quality learning experiences in different modes and provide a democratisation of learning opportunities to students in a more flexible way. Online teaching encompasses the different and sometimes overlapping areas of e-learning, which may be a fully online distance learning approach or blended learning,

which may combine elements of e-learning with more traditional classroom interaction. This paper will focus on the experience of the authors in using e-learning as part of an integrated or blended approach, and the issues of identity this has posed.

Identity is an important part of building an online community, such as an educational community. An awareness of others' identities informs our reactions to them and helps us to evaluate their behaviour. Over time members of an online community can become attuned to the nuances of each other's communication style as they develop an

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online ‘voice’. These clues are not always reliable and a number of documented accounts of ‘trolling’ and impersonation within such communities are cited by Demiris (2005, p. 184).

This chapter aims to determine how online identities can impact on the student experience in e-learning in a blended learning environment, and how online identities can be best utilised in these programmes to improve the student experience. It will also attempt to determine if online identities reflect the students’ true self. The chapter will accomplish these aims through reviewing and analysing the relevant literature in the fields of education and cyberpsychology, and also describing and analysing the experiences of students who have used online identities as part of a blended learning Masters in Cyberpsychology in Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Ireland.

The chapter will address the question of what is an online identity, considering the types of identity that are often employed by individuals, and considering how these may be affected by the online environment. The impact of online identities in education will then be addressed, firstly by considering the types of online identity portrayed by students as part of an educational programme, and then considering how these may impact on student achievement and satisfaction. Finally, the potential benefits of online identities in education will be considered, along with an overview of how educators can make the most of online identities to improve the student experience.

BACKGROUND

Some work has been done on the impact of online teaching on the role and identity of educators (Wallace, 2002) which has shown that the identity of academics can be blurred as the educational process becomes ‘productised’. This distancing of the teacher from the student has been an aspect of e-learning that has tried to be addressed in a

number of ways in the past. Email contact, video conferences, and individualised assignments, have all sought to bridge the gap left by the absence of face-to-face teaching. Using virtual environments appears to offer a solution to the one-to-many learning experience which can be offered to greater numbers at greater distances without the loss of a sense of personal contact.

Teachers are beginning to use social networks to hold distance education classes and report that the discussion can get livelier when students assume a digital persona (Foster, 2007, p. 24). Over one hundred and fifty colleges in the USA have some form of presence in Second Life, as do colleges from more than a dozen other countries. Foster (2007, p. 26) goes on to describe the different approaches of educators in the fields of architecture, ethnography, creative writing, literature, and technology in their use of virtual environments to promote better learning.

Studies of computer-mediated communication in the 1980s suggested that email removed many of the clues such as gender, age, race, social status and facial expression which we use to identify with each other. This reduced the inhibitions of participants (Williams, 2007, p. 7). Three-dimensional virtual environments, and the ability to represent oneself as an avatar, have provided opportunities not just to hide these clues but to create alternative ones. The visual representation of self, and the ability to alter it, has introduced a new dimension to communication within online communities.

In the early 1990s researchers were finding distinctions between the use of computers as standalone tools or as tools for communication. Turkle (1994, p. 159) found that individuals working alone in a gaming environment used the computer to work through issues of control and skill development. When the computer was used as a communications medium the control provided by the computer helped to develop skills for collaboration and even intimacy. The medium allowed for the exploration of self and

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