Investigating Modes of Student Inquiry in Second Life as Part of a Blended Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses activities carried out in the virtual world of Second Life (SL) as part of a compulsory class in the first year of an undergraduate programme. The paper identifies the contribution of SL to the students’ learning environment and an Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) approach to programme design. The reasons for taking an IBL approach are explained in relation to institutional and disciplinary goals. The paper reflects on the contribution of the three key learning environments—the classroom, WebCT and SL—to students’ learning. SL is evaluated in relation to a conceptual framework of IBL. It is concluded that SL has made a contribution to students’ achievement of learning outcomes from the class, and has facilitated the development of students’ inquiry skills. In conclusion, further avenues for developing research and teaching are identified.

Keywords: Information Management, Inquiry Based Learning, Learning Environment, Virtual Learning, Virtual Worlds

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses activities carried out in Second Life (SL) and identifies its contribution to students’ learning environments and to an Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) approach to programme design, adopting an action research orientation (Levy, 2003). The class in which the SL activities take place is a core (compulsory) module entitled, Information Literacy, taken in the first year of an undergraduate programme in the United Kingdom (UK). It is a campus-based class that already has a blended learning approach commonly found in the UK (Sharpe et al., 2006), combining face-to-face sessions with the use of what in the UK is called a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), WebCT, and interaction with other web-based resources such as e-journals and wikis.

The author is the class coordinator. The aim of incorporating the SL learning environment into the class was, firstly, to improve students’ engagement with research models of a core subject (Information Behaviour), thus contributing to a key learning outcome of the class. Secondly, she aimed to identify whether SL was synergistic with an IBL approach. The research was supported by an award from the University of Sheffield’s Centre for Inquiry Based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS). CILASS also funded the purchase

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and rent of a SL island, Infolit iSchool, for its first year.

SL is a 3-D virtual world and the trademark of Linden Lab. People are represented within SL by 3-D avatars; via these avatars they can create and trade objects, rent land, and participate in a variety of activities organised by other SL residents.

The paper begins by describing the class in which the learning activities took place, and the characteristics of the teaching-learning environment (TLE). This includes identifying the nature of the blended delivery of this class and the overall pedagogic approach to the programme. The reasons for taking an IBL approach are explained in relation to institutional and disciplinary goals. It goes on to consider SL in relation to IBL, connecting it to a conceptual model derived from a longitudinal research project into students’ conceptions of IBL, undertaken by CILASS.

After describing the activities that took place in SL, and their relation to the learning outcomes and assessment of the class, the contribution of SL to students’ learning is discussed. The article finishes by evaluating SL in relation to the conceptual framework of IBL presented earlier.

CONTEXT AND AIMS: THE INFORMATION LITERACY CLASS

The context for the research reported here is a class, Information Literacy, which is core in the level one (freshman) year of the B.Sc. Information Management (IM) degree offered in the Department of Information Studies at the University of Sheffield. The number of students taking the class is 20-30 each year. The overall aims of the class are to develop students’ information literacy skills in key areas and to enhance their understanding of information literacy and information behaviour theories. The class is worth one-third of the credits in the first semester.

Additionally, the class is designed to develop students’ inquiry skills so that they can engage with mini research projects carried out the following semester (Cox et al., 2008a), with the ultimate goal of conducting individual research projects in their final year. The Information Literacy class also contributes to the progression of other key skills e.g., group work skills.

The author had identified that the teaching and assessment strategy for the class was not enabling students to demonstrate their grasp of information behaviour theory, which had been assessed primarily through an academic essay. This had led to the reproduction of information rather than evidence of ability to apply and understand the models. IBL was seen as a means to engage students more meaningfully with the models. SL provided an environment in which data gathering could take place, providing students with unique data, to which they could apply their understanding of the models. Thus the aims of the action research were to facilitate deeper engagement with the subject matter, and to identify whether SL itself was a viable environment for IBL. This article reports on the delivery of the Information Literacy class in the 2007/8 and 2008/9 academic years.

THE TEACHING-LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Since this paper is concerned with the students’ personal learning environment, this section begins by identifying a framework for discussion. Entwistle (2003) notes the many ways in which the term ‘environment’ is interpreted in educational literature. Entwistle and Smith (2002) developed a conceptual framework to describe influences on the outcomes of learning, amplified through the major project on Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses (ETL Project, 2003), which investigated the TLE in different disciplines. Entwistle (2003) identifies how these influences combine to determine the quality of learning within the TLE.
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