

Chapter 12

Field Notes from the Wild: Adults Learning in a Virtual World

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ABSTRACT

This chapter takes a novel orientation to understanding adults as learners by arguing that the context rather than age of the learner is more indicative of their approaches to learning to use technologies. Drawing on data from a study of everyday avatars learning to build the online virtual world Second Life®, this chapter argues that learning through recreational activities such as these adults do in Second Life® is adult learning and a kind of 21st century learning that takes place in the wild of virtual worlds. In order to imagine ourselves, students and colleagues or corporate employees engaged by and in world-building, educators must view online technologies as rich social contexts rather than simply educational technologies. The roles of teachers, trainers or support personnel are as designers for learning. They create contexts where the learning objectives they have set can be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter takes a novel orientation to understanding adults as learners by arguing that the context rather than age of the learner is more indicative of their approaches to learning technologies. While assumptions about adult learners have also been formulated for and within contexts, such as the work-place, and higher or continuing education (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007),

they provide little guidance for understanding how adults learn *in the wild* of a virtual world, such as the online 3D world Second Life®.

In this chapter I draw data from a study of everyday avatars¹ (Lave, 1988) learning to create the 3D virtual world, Second Life®. Taken from a virtual ethnography (Mason, 1999) of Second Life® Residents, these data consist of participant-observer field notes, individual and group interviews with approximately 20 avatars over 6 months. The purpose of this chapter is to provide evidence of how adults learn naturally

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in a technological environment and to consider implications of these findings on teaching and learning in conventional settings.

BACKGROUND

Over the last 20 years, new learning theories have begun to emerge that take into account how the activities made possible by computers lead to new assumptions about how people learn. Proponents of constructionism (Papert, 1991) view learning as a psychological process of constructing knowledge (Piaget, 1970) that happens particularly well when learners create something personally meaningful. The things they create derive their meaning from the social relations, context and culture surrounding them (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 2001). Computers and now the Internet provide unprecedented opportunities for learning because they are creative, social contexts.

A more recent body of research extends these same ideas to the study of users of virtual worlds. Virtual worlds include on and offline computer games and worlds (e.g. Whyville.net) where users engage in elaborate social contexts and activities. These activities can include trading goods, creating one's avatar (a digital representation of oneself) or achieving goals to win points. In his work with videogame players, Gee (2003) identified thirty-six learning principles built into good video games. His work is supported by others (Black, 2006; Kafai, in press, Kafai, Fields & Cook, under review; Steinkuehler 2005, 2007) who have also demonstrated that "what [people] are doing when they are playing good [computer] games is often good learning" (Gee, 2003 p. 198). Problem-solving, decoding and using the vernacular of the world, and developing an identity through group affiliations and communities of practice are some of the ways learning occurs in these environments.

Only within the last few years has research along this same trajectory included adults in mas-

sively multiplayer online worlds such as World of Warcraft and Second Life®. These studies show that *play*, whether structured gaming (Yee, 2006) or unstructured creative endeavors (Kozlov & Rheingold, 2007; Ortiz de Gortari, 2007) is part and parcel of these worlds. They also show that seasoned, middle-aged users find the social aspects of the game most rewarding even when their peers question the age appropriateness of their interest (Quandt, Grueninger & Wimmer, 2009). These studies suggest that adults engage in these virtual worlds to accomplish and enjoy the same things youths do: problem-solving, decoding and using the vernacular of the world, and developing an identity and group affiliations (Boellstorff, 2008; Steinkuehler, 2005; Yee, 2006). Both adults and youths learn how to effectively be in these worlds, and in the process, develop a constellation of skills and knowledge (Steinkuehler, 2007). These are the same 21st century skills and knowledge, educators and employers argue are necessary for success in the future (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004).

Even with the foundation provided by the above-mentioned research, conceptualizing adults learning in these contexts is problematic. First, the mainstream press has helped construct an image of virtual-world users as primarily asocial, male adolescents; adult users are additionally perceived as engaging in age-inappropriate activities (Quandt, Grueninger & Wimmer, 2009). Overall, virtual worlds are seen more negatively than not, making it difficult to perceive the diversity of virtual-world users, and the legitimacy of their activities not only in themselves, but also as contexts for learning (Steinkuehler, 2007). Second, research of virtual worlds and their users is relatively new and it takes time for findings to reach larger audiences and change public opinion. Current research suggests that virtual world users include a growing number of diverse men and women who are college-educated professionals, married, with and without children, or single (Quandt, Grueninger & Wimmer, 2009, Yee, 2006). Third, educators and

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