

Chapter 1

Linking MUVE Education and Best Educational Practices

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ABSTRACT

A major impediment to the adoption of multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) is a misperception that their use is more a function of their exotic nature than their ability to deliver a quality learning experience. The linkage between best educational practices and the use of MUVEs as educational venues shows a mix of strong and weaker linkages parallels that of traditional education. MUVEs are extremely adept at providing active learning experiences, providing scenarios for students to examine their pre-conceptions, creating real-world settings for learning, and for developing collaborative environments and student-faculty interactions. There is evidence that, when well designed, educational environments support different learning styles, although this is poorly studied. The remaining best educational practices demonstrate either loose associations, or lack demonstrable examples for their support. These practices revolve around feedback both to students and to the instructor, and course assessment. Despite substantial research on these practices there seems ample opportunity for virtual worlds to provide not only comparable, but often-superior examples of best practices when applied properly. This inference should encourage others to experiment at both teaching in virtual worlds and researching the educational outcomes from them.

INTRODUCTION

Progress in the adoption of multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) as potential venues for online education is not occurring with the speed

that some who are already engaged in it might expect. Impediments to this ready adoption include fear of technology, steep learning curve, the need for high speed internet, lack of institutional support, and a reticence on the part of educators to use a game for a learning venue. While some of these have been examined in the literature,

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one major deterrent to this adoption has not been examined in detail. Some educators see that best practices for education are being sacrificed for the adoption of an exotic technology. Perhaps more importantly, administrators often share this view and are, therefore, not willing to invest the often-minimal financial resources necessary to allow their faculty the opportunity to experiment with it. This chapter examines, through examples of educational venues throughout the MUVE known as Second Life, each of the ten (10) recognized “best practices in education.” Its intents are to:

1. Dispel the myth that using MUVES as a venue for education is just another fad based on charismatic forms of technology.
2. Open a dialogue for investigating ways of achieving best practices in education through the use of the tools of Multi-user Virtual Environments (MUVES) such as Second Life.
3. Encourage others to develop effective learning environments inside virtual worlds that meet the criteria of best practices.

In preparation for this examination it is best to define the terms and conditions of the discourse. Best practices are generally understood to represent methods, processes, techniques, or activities that are more effective at producing a desired outcome than others delivered in the same circumstance. Some would call best practices the most efficient and effective methods of accomplishing a particular task. For this chapter I will assume that one is seeking to determine not whether or not approaches employed in MUVES are the preeminent of these best practices, but rather that attempts at replicating known best practices for education are feasible. Evidence for this feasibility is provided based on observation and established research. Where best practices are not explicitly or obviously demonstrated this chapter suggests

possible ways in which they might be established and how their effectiveness might be examined.

There are many best practices for education depending on the application and setting. There are best practices for lecturing, best practices for evaluation, best practices for distance education, and best practices for online education. Assuming that education within a MUVE is not normally going to reflect the traditional Victorian model of education, it is safe to assume that best practices for delivering lectures are of little interest here, and evaluation is only one small portion of the overall teaching and learning best practices with which this chapter is concerned. One could easily assume that, because teaching in virtual worlds is a method of online education, that the ten best practices of online education would be those most appropriately evaluated. While this is something that needs to be examined, the approach here is to show that general best practices for education – those most commonly associated with face-to-face classes are reproducible not just in an online environment, but in a 3-D virtual environment. If best practices for traditional educational venues can be shown to be effective in virtual worlds then there is a likelihood that innovative educators, both face-to-face and online, will consider the use of virtual worlds for teaching.

The process of examining the relationship between best educational practices and the use of virtual worlds for delivery begins by listing the commonly acknowledged ten best practices of education along with a short description of each. While there is no one set of ten best practices, most lists include those examined here. Their enumeration and initial description provides a context for their implementation inside a virtual world. Each also provides face-to-face examples of how these practices are applied to provide comparisons for potential virtual world contexts. This initial discussion informs the examination of Second Life practices.

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