Chapter 3
Learning Places:
A Case Study of Collaborative Pedagogy Using Online Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

The chapter, based on a set of developed teaching scenarios, discusses how virtual worlds, in particular Second Life, can be used in student centered pedagogy; intertwining theory and practice, emphasizing process-thinking, critical perspectives, and strengthen the confidence and independence of the student. Drawing upon experiences from traditional education, Web 2.0-tools, and problem based pedagogy grounded in project work, social media, engineering, and digital humanities, this chapter presents a pedagogy based upon the concepts of participatory culture, and co-creation on the part of students in the learning process. The authors have been involved in developing the core curriculum for a term-long (four month) course for Museum Studies. A problem based, student centered pedagogy is both integrated and contrasted with traditional classroom settings, that are also part of the planning, implementation, and assessment stages of the course. Based upon the practical experience of conducting this course, the article critically discusses ICT and problem oriented learning on a general level – including the benefits and disadvantages for the student and for the teachers. How this approach to learning, from the experiences in virtual worlds, can fit in to the established structure of learning goals, lectures, examination, and assessment is questioned in the chapter, based on the experiences gathered from teaching the course.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter emphasizes the potentials for using virtual worlds in student-based pedagogy. Virtual worlds are three-dimensional, persistent environments that are distributed over the Internet, which function as spaces for communication, co-operation and sharing from one to many users. We give examples from a course developed and

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conducted within the framework of the Museum Studies Program at Umeå University, Sweden. Based on these examples we also draw some general conclusions – both positive and negative – regarding the practice of pedagogy using virtual worlds.

HUMlab (a digital humanities computing lab), in a partnership with the Department of Culture and Media, has hosted the digital components of term-long courses in Museum Studies and Culture Analysis. The project described below started when representatives from the Museum Studies Program approached staff in HUMlab to discuss possibilities for their second year undergraduate students learning what they referred to as "digital competence", without any further profound precision. The initial aim was to give the students basic knowledge in PowerPoint, and in audio and photo editing. Starting from that fairly vague concept, we came up with the idea to let students build multimedia exhibitions in the virtual world of Second Life (SL) during a full term-long course.

Teaching and learning with virtual worlds involves extensive planning, a coordination of the elements that are specific to the media, and an attention to the contexts provided by the subjects taught. The coordination and synthesis of the theoretical and administrative components between the digital realm of HUMlab and the classrooms of Culture and Media presented a series of challenges. Three dimensional multimedia virtual worlds can be a challenge to educators that are used to books and two-dimensional images. In our own experience, we have mostly avoided the recreation of classrooms and lecture halls in virtual worlds, such as ActiveWorlds and Second Life. Instead we have presented virtual worlds, mainly in the form of Second Life, to students as a tool for their own expression. The dynamics of successful group work, and an array of skills for digital literacy (visual, audio, design, composition and convergence) form the major learning goals of the courses.

The overall aim of the term for the students is to learn theoretical perspectives on interpreting our contemporary society. The SL-based element is intended to fit with more traditional style of learning of the course. On one hand Second Life became an environment to work with the different theoretical perspectives studied during the course. The students took lecture-style classes in gender, class, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, and globalization. On the other hand, SL became one tool among several in the pedagogical tool-set in combination with written examinations, seminars and discussions, each based around a core curriculum. There was an attempt to bridge the gaps between theory and practice through the use of Second Life. Involvement in technology became the means for both learning how to build an exhibition, and for reflection upon digital media as a way to present information. A secondary aim with the whole project was to give the students "digital competence" – in that we include for example an understanding of the affordances of various digital media, knowledge in handling different programs, a critical and reflective approach to digital media, and how to present information in different media.

All teaching in Second Life was conducted in HUMlab. HUMlab is a center for the humanities and information technology, often carried out through a multidisciplinary approach, but with a special focus toward the disciplines at the Humanities Faculty. Work along similar lines to the museum studies project involving virtual worlds has been done in HUMlab before. HUMlab ran the project "Virtual weddings and the real wedding of linguistics, literature and cultural studies" in 1998-2004 (Svensson, 2002). Instead of writing a traditional third year essay, students in language studies visualized and presented their ideas in the virtual world of ActiveWorlds. Each year the project centered around one complex concept – such as Weddings, Realities, City or Monstrosity. Students constructed and visualized their "essay" through building environments, linking objects,