Chapter 7
Signs and Guideposts:
Expanding the Course Paradigm with Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning has long been touted as critical to deep understanding, learning, and ownership of knowledge. Technology has ushered in many new ways for people to interact; a virtual world is one such category of technological tools that enhance engagement in a learning experience. Using a virtual world for instruction does not and should not be an 'all or nothing' proposition. Virtual worlds are flexible, rich, collaborative environments which can be used in a variety of ways to augment a traditional, instructor-led course, Web-based courses, and other types of courseware, in addition to serving as a 'stand-alone' solution. Grounded in experiential learning and constructivist theory, this chapter explores ways in which one may exploit the flexibility of a virtual world to meet the real-life demands of traditional courses.

Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-OR's, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. When forced to recognize that the extremes cannot be acted upon, it is still inclined to hold that they are all right in theory but that when it comes to practical matters circumstances compel us to compromise.

Educational philosophy is no exception. –Dewey ~ Experience and Education, 1938

Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand. –Confucius ~ 450 BC

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning has long been touted as critical to deep understanding, learning, and ownership of knowledge (Dewey, 1938; Dede, 2007; Kolb, 1984a). Technology has ushered in many new ways for people to interact; a virtual world is one such category of technological tools that enhance the way in which we may engage in a learning experience. Some believe that in order to use a virtual world in a 'mature manner', one must evolve to using the virtual world to do 'work'. While our definitions on 'work' may differ, it is essential to simply use the virtual world to solve whatever challenge it is suited to address. Using a virtual world for instruction does not and should not be an 'all or nothing' proposition. Virtual worlds are flexible, rich, collaborative environments which can be used in a variety of ways to augment a traditional, instructor-led course in addition to serving as a 'stand-alone' solution. Virtual worlds provide a unique environment for problem finding because they provide a multisensory, immersive, graphically rich way to represent an authentic environment, communicate, collaborate, coexist, and co-create with other participants (Gamor, in press; Holden, Westfall & Gamor, 2010). This chapter explores ways in which one may exploit the flexibility of a virtual world to meet the real-life demands of traditional learning situations.

BACKGROUND

Rather than starting from a blank screen, the author applies theories, methodologies, models and other constructs that have (in some cases) been used for decades in developing traditional instructor-led courses, courseware, and web-based courses. In some cases, the theories, methodologies, models, and other constructs have been modified in order to expand them to the new modality under discussion: virtual worlds.

As with any technology, it is important to apply lessons learned in order to optimize the use of the new tool under consideration. In this case, appropriate lessons learned are drawn from learning theorists (such as John Dewey, Benjamin Bloom, and David Kolb), instructional methodologies or models (such as TRADOC Levels of Interactivity and the 3D Learning Maturity Model), and other constructs (such as the Push-Pull Paradigm). While it is out of the scope of this chapter to address every relevant theory, methodology, model, or other construct, salient points from each of the issues foundational to this chapter are discussed from the perspective of a select, representative few. Specifically, experiential learning theory is pivotal to understanding the *power* of a 3D world and the instructional design *responsibility* necessary to achieve optimal immersive learning experiences. Awareness of instructional methodologies and instructional design considerations is critical for conceptualizing virtual worlds as an instructional tool. Knowledge of relevant learning models help to contextualize the affordances of virtual worlds into a familiar framework, and new constructs designed around the newer media used in the classrooms today can help to light a path for educators trying to figure out how to use the technology rather than have the technology become yet another box to check.

From John Dewey (1938) to David Kolb (1984a; 1984b), theorists have described experiential learning as educational events in which the participant's subjective experience is fundamental to the learning process. In this sense, it is not just about 'what is presented', but about 'how a learner interacts with the what'. Equally important, it is also about how the learner applies the newly acquired knowledge to other experiences. Experiential learning models are not in scarcity and are the subject of renewed discourse given recent developments and advancements in social media and immersive learning technologies.

In one case in particular, researchers have borrowed from the concept of a process improvement

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