

Chapter 16

Virtual Worlds – Enjoyment, Motivation and Anonymity: Environments to Reengage Disaffected Learners with Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the effectiveness of virtual worlds as environments in which disaffected or “failed” learners can be reengaged with education. The premise is that virtual worlds allow learners to “play” with their identity and potentially reinvent themselves as better learners. This idea is supported by research which shows virtual worlds as engaging, motivating, fun places to learn. The topics of “identity in virtual worlds,” “identity and learning,” and “education in virtual worlds” are examined. One hundred 13 to 17 year old pupils were observed working in the Second Life teen Grid which is a virtual world restricted to young people between 13 and 17 years old. Written feedback from 68 of these pupils was analyzed. This is supported by in excess of 1500 hours of participant observations in the adult Second Life virtual world.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores how the concept of virtual worlds can be used to support the learning of disaffected pupils. The hypothesis is that disengaged

or disaffected learners can experience success and become more effective learners by creating a new learner identity in a virtual world.

Craft (2007, p. 206) states: “As virtual worlds are a recent phenomenon, the body of relevant academic literature is still nascent”. However Craft (2007, p. 210) goes on to point out that since the

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works of Plato and Aristotle, philosophers have questioned how humans respond to simulations and images of behavior (although Craft focuses on immoral behavior), and how such images make the behavior more likely in the viewer. Although the concept of learner identity in virtual worlds is new, the underlying question is old.

People, young and old can construct whole new characters with associated identity issues and live (and possibly learn) through them in a virtual world environment. Being able to learn as Another Self anonymously or what I refer to as Anonymous Self has huge benefits for the shy, scared or embarrassed. In 2006 I ran a teaching assistant training course for men; older men reengaging with learning. They were nervous and confessed to having many fears. These confessions usually surfaced after four or five weeks of the ten week course. They had bottled up their fears hiding behind their strong masculine outward facades. Most had little success in learning and had bitter experiences of school. Once they shared their fears they started again with a new set of expectations and a willingness to seek help and guidance. It occurred to me that being able to construct a new façade to try out new skills and acceptably show weakness would have allowed them to explore and experience learning as a different and possibly more successful learner earlier in their lives.

Local Authorities (LAs) in the UK have a duty to provide educational services to any pupils or students who cannot attend a mainstream school. Reengaging learners requires more flexibility in attitude to the curriculum and therefore more scope for new approaches. It may require new methods of online delivery, support and activities. The Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) e-strategy (Harnessing technology: transforming learning and children's services, 2005) has the reengaging of disaffected learners and using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to reach all learners as major themes.

The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta, 2005, p. 1) categorizes students requiring alternative provision as:

- those excluded for a period of more than fifteen days from school
- those not able to attend mainstream school for an extended period owing to medical reasons
- those who are members of a traveler community

These students are more likely to have lower literacy and numeracy skills, exhibit disruptive and challenging behavior and will need a focus on developing key skills for improving self-control and self-esteem.

Bradford and Crowe (2006, p. 330) point out that "gaming sites" are perceived as "cool places" to hangout and Second Life, where my project was hosted, is often confused with a regular gaming environment which may give it kudos with younger learners. Of course it is not a game, there are no rules of play and you can't win. For example, Habbo hotel is the most popular teen virtual world with 124 million registered users and 11 million visits to its site every month.

Internet time has replaced television time in the United States and Europe isn't far behind in this trend. The next step is the development of internet browsing on your television using the remote control. So, televisions may get a new lease of life but traditional programming is losing the battle with the internet.

Even if we put aside all the physical and technological benefits of learning in and through virtual worlds, simply being able to learn as "another self" has many benefits for both capable learners and for previously unsuccessful or unfulfilled learners. Learners can enhance their learning skills or become learners for the first time.

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