Chapter III

Learning Sociology in a Massively Multistudent Online Learning Environment

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Abstract

Is it possible to enhance the learning of sociology students by staging simulated field studies in a MMOLE (massively multi-student online learning environment) modeled after successful massively multiplayer online games (MMOG) such as Eve and Lineage? Lacking such a test option, the authors adapted an existing MMOG—"The Sims Online"—and conducted student exercises in that virtual environment during two successive semesters. Guided by questions keyed to course objectives, the sociology students spent 10 hours observing online interactions in TSO and produced essays revealing different levels of analytical and interpretive ability. The students in an advanced course on deviance performed better than those in an introductory course, with the most detailed reports focusing on scamming, trashing, and tagging. Although there are no technical obstacles to the formation and deployment of a sociology MMOLE able to serve hundreds of thousands of students, such a venture would have to solve major financial and political problems.

Introduction

Sociology 101 is one of those ubiquitous general education courses taken annually by a million or more disinterested undergraduates who frequently cram and forget rather than form a deeply learned ability to see their lives through the lens of the sociological perspective. Part of the problem is the large lecture and the academic preference for paper based displays of learning, both of which enfeeble sociology's great potential for learning by doing.

As is the case with all college courses, the teaching of sociology is a loosely regulated cottage industry that lacks any national standards and is in the hands of personnel who rarely have had any formal training as instructors. It comes as no surprise that the quality of instruction is variable and inconsistent. The typical introduction to sociology is a conventional and familiar dosage of lecture, textbook reading, term paper, and written examinations—a mix that encourages short-term learning and rote repetition of the course content. The better versions feature small classes and teacher orchestrated discussions that encourage students to make connections between what they already know and what they are learning and thereby increase the likelihood of a more meaningful and enduring experience. Better yet are those classes that use simulations and other similarly engaging devices to ensure that students understand the material well enough to apply it analytically to real or fabricated social situations. Such classes are, unfortunately, in a small minority.

What to do about it? The success of online learning management systems (LMS) where students are able to "meet" and interact in cybernetic space suggests to some that we will one day see a convergence between such spaces and the much more sophisticated (from a functional and technological perspective) massively multiplayer online games (MMOG) like Lineage, Eve, and Guild Wars. With that possibility in mind, one can begin to imagine sociology courses that convene online in pedagogically designed spaces (a massively multi-student online learning environment or MMOLE) where students would spend much (if not all) of their time learning by doing.

Why Sociology?

For those who believe a college education should have demonstrable utilitarian benefits (rather than the vague "intellectual enrichment" of late adolescents), the study of sociology is a promising competitor for continuation in the general education requirements. Sociology studies how and why people behave as they do. It deconstructs naïve beliefs about the organization of human relations and replaces them with the ability to "see" the systematic ways that social systems distribute power and wealth and enable individual actions. Students endowed with such a vision and having to interact every day with other humans in small groups and complex bureaucracies are better able to make their social systems work for, rather than against, them. A student who is able to describe the relationship, say, between values, social status, and the reward system in a college fraternity, takes from a course on sociology benefits unavailable to a student who can define these abstract terms but not recognize them embodied in action.

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