

Chapter 5

Facilitation Strategies to Moderate Synchronous Virtual Discussion Groups in Teacher Training

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on an exploratory case study investigating strategies to facilitate group discussions in Second Life, a three-dimensional virtual world. The purpose was to identify best practices for discussion facilitation in-world from the perspective of a virtual host and a discussion facilitator. A host and a facilitator moderated four virtual group discussions with 16 in-service teachers enrolled in a graduate technology class. The chapter discusses several themes that emerged from the host's and the facilitator's debriefings. Key themes include the need for a careful selection of the communication modality (text or voice or a combination), strategies to promote interactivity among the participants, the critical need for

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at least one facilitator in addition to the host, the need for clear ground rules for the participants, and clear guidelines for the host and the facilitator. Several challenges experienced during the process of facilitating these virtual events are discussed and recommendations are made to address these difficulties. This chapter is of interest to educators who are planning to substitute in-class group discussions with synchronous group discussions in-world.

INTRODUCTION

Holding a social meeting in a three-dimensional (3D) virtual world rather than in a physical space can be a challenge (Konstantinidis, 2017). Numerous considerations are involved when planning a gathering in a synthetic world, including clarifying the purpose (e.g., social, educational, or business), choosing a location (public or private access), and considering a suitable format (e.g., lectures, discussions, exploratory fieldtrips, or task-based activities).

The notion of multimodal communication is another critical aspect of virtual worlds. It not only consists of verbal-mode voice and text chat but also of non-verbal mode aspects, such as avatar movement, kinesics, proxemics, and appearance (Peterson, 2006; Wigham & Chanier, 2013). Compared to two-dimensional (2D) online environments, the multimodal nature of virtual worlds has been associated with richer and more effective collaborative learning (Dalgarno & Lee, 2009), offers an authentic environment for communication (Liou, 2012), increased student engagement, and better learning outcomes (Claman, 2015).

Due to the complexity of the communication modalities, the expert facilitation of a virtual group discussion deserves special attention. This chapter revolves around the facilitation of virtual group discussion events for educational purposes. Girvan and Savage (2013), for example, provide excellent prior, during, and post guidelines with regard to individual and group interviews conducted in Second Life®, which is a three-dimensional semi-immersive virtual world where users can interact, collaboratively work on projects, explore regions, navigate in different ways (walk, run, fly, dive, etc.), and communicate with each other in real time using voice or text. Girvan and Savage (2013) highlight a facilitator's skills set, such as the ability to manage multiple threads simultaneously.

Similarly, Schmeil et al. (2013) have formulated guidelines based on their experience in organizing and conducting social conferences in virtual worlds. One of their suggestions is to create break-out rooms, or so-called "satellites", instead of having everyone gather in the same virtual room. The satellite approach might increase the participants' willingness to engage and interact with each other more informally. Although a satellite offers more privacy than a whole-group discussion, each satellite might still need its own private facilitator, depending on the purpose or task.

Wang et al. (2014) highlight the complexity of group discussions in virtual worlds. The authors note potentially challenging factors, such as the combined use of text, voice, and avatar gestures, and offer pragmatic advice with an emphasis on advance preparation, skillful multitasking, and co-facilitation to ensure smooth communication within a group. Their participants expressed great appreciation for the co-facilitation because it helped them manage the overwhelming amount of information coming in from multiple communication channels.

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