Chapter 4
Classrooms Without Walls:
Teaching Together in Second Life

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Second Life—an online, three-dimensional, virtual world—offers educators and students the opportunity to enter a virtual classroom, participate in synchronous online discussion and decision making, and engage in group projects with teams of students located in geographically distant universities. The free basic account and portability of the program provides a cost effective way to offer students an enriched educational experience. The visual three-dimensional nature of the space and the ability to engage in either texted or voiced synchronous communication add to the user's sense of social presence, giving educational experiences in Second Life a set of communication characteristics unique among computer-mediated communication contexts. The present case study examines the communication challenges and achievements of a collaborative classroom group project in which students from three different, geographically dispersed universities worked together and responded to each other's work to reach a group outcome. Technological and communication concerns are addressed and recommendations are made for motivating students in ways that prepare them to become involved with and focused on achieving the group project goals.

CASE BACKGROUND: THE COMPUTER-MEDIATED CLASSROOM

Imagine a classroom without walls—a classroom free from physical constraints and limitations. What kinds of learning opportunities would such a classroom offer? Johnston (1992) asked educators to imagine such a learning environment; one in which students participate both in- and outside of class, shy students feel comfortable and participate as much as others, discussions occur whenever most convenient and with people anywhere in the world, all from the comfort of a student's home. Although computer-mediated communication (CMC) was

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still in its infancy in 1992, Johnston predicted that online discussion would open a new world of educational opportunities for students.

Today, the future Johnston (1992) imagined has become a virtual reality, with evidence to support her prediction that online discussion and collaboration between geographically distant students offers advantages for student learning. Interacting via online chat with students who attend universities geographically distant from their own challenges students in ways not often available in the standard "real-life" classroom course provided by a single university. This interactive experience and the attendant communication challenges involved better prepare students for the organizational work life of the 21st century.

In general, the CMC literature indicates that CMC use can enhance class discussion and offer students a wealth of opportunities for learning and collaboration that would be difficult and costly to achieve in other ways. Online collaborative group participation stimulates student learning; increases student participation, cognitive effort, critical thinking, vigorous debate, positive team building, and dynamic group problem solving; and helps develop an awareness of a connection to a larger global community (Gaimster, 2007; Schrire, 2004, 2006; Urbanovich, 2009; Vess, 2005). Students feel better prepared and more willing to express their thoughts online, take responsibility for their participation in the classroom, and engage the course materials and educational learning process in deeper and more beneficial ways (Urbanovich, 2009; Vess, 2005; Wood & Fassett, 2003). Collaborative online discussion often increases the quality of student work and produces a "combined collaborative achievement [that] considerably surpasses the simple sum of individual contributions" (Kanev, Kimura, & Orr, 2009, p. 59).

Further, the educational literature provides evidence that online discussion, both asynchronous and synchronous, facilitates classroom learning despite its limitations. Synchronous CMC chat environments, similar to Second Life, have been shown to be useful for office hours, decision-making, brainstorming, and community building (Branon & Essex, 2001). Wood and Fassett (2003) argue that learning through a CMC context empowers students and imbues them with a renewed sense of responsibility for participation in the classroom in a way that creatively transcends traditional classroom power and social norms, affords students an opportunity to renegotiate their classroom social positions with one another and the perceived role of the teacher, and to reconsider the classroom and educational learning process. Vess (2005) reports that students in the CMC context exhibit greater interactivity and cognitive effort and are more inclined to continue a discussion thread, contribute more than is required to the discussion, pursue original sources for support of their positions, and engage in vigorous debate; while students in similar face-to-face discussions tend to respond to the instructor's questions, but not to each other. Schrire (2004, 2006) argues that the networked conferencing model provided by the CMC medium facilitates online collaborative learning in a way that de-emphasizes the instructor as an authority and increases student active participation in the learning process. Students engage in conversation and develop a collaborative process that plays an important part in individual student learning and facilitates higher levels of cognitive performance in such critical thinking skills as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and integration of ideas and positions. Gaimster (2007) describes the influence of CMC for developing a positive team-building environment and an engagement that promotes dynamic interactive learning. Thus, CMC provides students with a way to work collaboratively to solve problems and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their solutions. Vess (2005) reports that students in an online course demonstrate collaborative learning and make contributions that are more cognitively elaborated than students in comparable face-to-face classroom situations. In addition, many students indicate