Chapter 3

Practice What You Preach:
Experiences with Teaching Virtual World Concepts in a Virtual World

Laura Benvenuti
Dutch Open University, The Netherlands

Gerrit C. van der Veer
Dutch Open University, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This chapter is not on the technology of Virtual Worlds. The authors discuss the application of a Virtual World as a teaching and learning environment for a course on Virtual Worlds. In their view, innovation and education should go hand in hand. Too often, new technologies are discussed without being applied. The authors argue that innovative technologies do belong in those classroom where their application is relevant to the topic. In thischapter, the authors discuss an example of how this issue can be tackled. They show that application of innovative tools is useful to all parties: students, lecturers and researchers, even if it raises new problems from which we all can learn.

INTRODUCTION

The Digital Communication curriculum of the Hogeschool Utrecht has, as one of its courses, a course on Virtual Worlds. As a strategic choice, the lecturers decided to rely on the same technology for the implementation of a learning and teaching environment.

New technologies in classroom offer opportunities for innovation. They also change the way students experience education. This can be challenging for educators who are confronted with unexpected situations. But use also promotes understanding. Through an assignment in a virtual world the students would gain more familiarity with the technology. The lecturers would get better acquainted with de didactic possibilities of the medium.

In this paper we share our observations from practice. We focus on the educational possibilities of virtual worlds with no preset narrative by describing the Virtual Worlds course, which partially took place in an Active Worlds environment. We discuss the advantages of moving part of the action to a virtual setting, but also point at its limitations. We describe some problems that

were raised by the medium and offer strategies to deal with them.

We show how to improve our understanding of new media and technology by combining education with research. In particular we measured the students' experienced "connectedness" and "learning" in the time span of the course.

A VIRTUAL VILLAGE AS A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

Virtual worlds with no preset narrative, such as Active Worlds or Second Life, are considered usable asset in education (Livingstone and Kemp 2006). The implementation of the learning environment in a virtual world is not necessarily successful.

The "Virtual Worlds" course of the Digital Communication curriculum of the Hogeschool Utrecht (University of Applied Science, Utrecht, the Netherlands) combines traditional instructional methods (classroom setting) with a collective practical assignment in an Active Worlds world. Starting with the spring of 2008, the students are asked to build an application, consisting of 3D-model of a house and its surroundings, and to place it in a common village situated in an Active Worlds environment. Figure 1, as well as Figure 4 and 5, show examples of students' work during the courses we analyzed.

The complementary approach of the Virtual Worlds course works very well: collaboration continues naturally in both worlds, virtual and real (Benvenuti et. al, 2008). The spring 2008 edition of the course was very successful. The relation between the courses subject and the applied technology was a powerful combination. Other success factors might be the choice for an immersive collaborative structure, or the village metaphor.

The question whether a virtual village is an appropriate tool to support a community of learners is not one-dimensional. Sense of community is a subjective concept. Some students consider participating in a community equivalent to sharing results with colleagues, others expect the results to be produced together.

The same applies to learning: the students who pass an exam frequently don't agree on what they have learned, nor on its significance. In 2008, we had investigated the students' opinion about the way the course was taught and about their own attitude. Though the answers were obviously positive – the students stated having found themselves involved and participating in the learning community - we noticed a large variety of opinions

Figure 1. the spring 2008 Asterix village: house of the bard and surroundings

7 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:
www.igi-global.com/chapter/practice-you-preach/46771

Related Content

A Private Cloud-Based Smart Learning Environment Using Moodle for Universities
T. S. Pradeep Kumar (2019). *Cases on Smart Learning Environments (pp. 188-202).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-private-cloud-based-smart-learning-environment-using-moodle-for-universities/219026

Comparison of Students Using Electronic Learning Website of the University of South Africa
Motlhabane Jacobus Maboe (2020). *International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments (pp. 24-35).*
www.irma-international.org/article/comparison-of-students-using-electronic-learning-website-of-the-university-of-south-africa/239583

ESL Learning via Facebook Among Science and Non-Science University Students
Shaidatul Akma Adi Kasuma (2021). *International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments (pp. 1-17).*
www.irma-international.org/article/esl-learning-via-facebook-among-science-and-non-science-university-students/278728

Relating Pedagogical and Learning Space Designs in Second Life
Ahmad John Reevesand Shailey Minocha (2011). *Teaching and Learning in 3D Immersive Worlds: Pedagogical Models and Constructivist Approaches (pp. 31-60).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/relating-pedagogical-learning-space-designs/52391

Rhizomatic Learning and Use of Mobile Instant Messaging Platforms: Case of University of Technology in South Africa
Frank Makozaand Laban Bagui (2022). *International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments (pp. 1-17).*
www.irma-international.org/article/rhizomatic-learning-use-mobile-instant/295304