Chapter 10
Empowering Faculty Communities for Fostering and Assessing Student Performance in Virtual Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study and a narrative of an experimental course, an undergraduate allied health interdisciplinary seminar, and its corresponding faculty learning community exploring how collaborative learning may be fostered in a virtual world. The objectives of the course included enhancing student technology literacy, engendering reflective practice, and creating a student-focused faculty learning community; additionally, the faculty learning community both inspired and was inspired by students, fueling innovative teaching practices which, as a result, have infused the college curriculum. Receiving mentoring from learning community members, students were responsible for the design, development, and implementation of a virtual solution to a student defined, healthcare-based, needs analysis. The last part of this case study provides explication of the RIME model of student and learning community assessment for use in teaching with a multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) which may, by extension, be applied to other emergent technologies and social media. This instrument assesses student learning outcomes in the areas of retention, immersion, motivation, and engagement.

INTRODUCTION

From *CSI* to *Law and Order*, Second Life and other virtual worlds are permeating popular culture; however, the effective use of these worlds in educational settings is still in its infancy. In fact, the first major meta-analysis analyzing 46 studies comparing face-to-face to online learning was completed only recently by the U.S. Department of Education. The results of the study concluded that "blended learning," that is courses or programs that include both face-to-face and online elements,

"has been more effective" (Means et al., 2009, p. xvii). Arne Duncan, the U.S. Secretary of Education, commented in a press release on the study that "this new report reinforces that effective teachers need to incorporate digital content into everyday classes and consider open-source learning management systems, which have proven cost effective in school districts and colleges nationwide" (U.S Department of Education, 2009). The possibilities offered by immersive environments for college curricula cannot be ignored. Although Mercy College already offers online and face-to-face courses, the college was receptive to exploring new hybrid learning forms, specifically a blended experimental course. As assessment was a critical question for both faculty and administrators, we created and implemented a tool, referred to as the RIME model, to gauge four crucial achievement factors including retention, immersion, motivation, and engagement. Additionally, the formation of a faculty learning community undergirded several of these factors with mixed results.

The professors chose Second Life (SL) as the multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) for the course. Second Life is "A 3-D online digital world imagined and created by its residents" (Linden, "What Is," 2008). Not only is Second Life a popular choice for Ohio Colleges, but it has more than 200 other US college presences who are deciphering its educational potential (Villano, 2008). "Second Life is ideally suited for (at least) two kinds of learning activities – empathy based learning and encounter learning" (LaChapelle, 2007, para. 5). The foundation of Second Life is to offer a space that can be manipulated and constructed through the creativity and self-expression of the user. Being the industry standard environment, Second Life has gained international recognition for its successes in building large scale communities of diverse populations. When Second Life was first created, it wasn't much more than a playground; however, today, Second Life is a fully functional society with a very real economy.

Contributing to that economy, a growing number of corporations and academic institutions have established mirror identities within Second Life. Some of the important statistics to consider are that as of October 2007, Second Life had more than 10 million registered users with the U.S. cornering 34.56% of the demographic. The largest age group is composed of 25-34 year olds, paralleling our college's demographic. In September 2007 alone, $6,685,585 in U.S. dollars was exchanged in Second Life with nearly six billion Linden dollars currently in circulation (Linden, "Economic," 2008; 2009). Although SL is, therefore, an intriguing MUVE from purely a culture studies perspective, it was selected for its ease of use, accessibility to students, and, most importantly, for its global adoption.

First, we provide a context for the creation of the course and its corresponding faculty learning community (FLC). Secondly, we describe our student cohort, along with the actual interdisciplinary course, and student semester projects within Second Life. Then we examine the faculty learning community and its connections to the student cohort. The avatars, (that is, the virtual representation of students), faculty learning community members, and professors all interacted in-world. In addition, we explicate our RIME model of student assessment. Finally, we discuss our conclusions and directions for future study. The evolution of our pedagogical process taught us the benefits of re-envisioning our fields and the importance of Gwendolyn Pough's Conference on College Composition and Communication address to be "forward thinking enough to imagine new combinations and collaborations" (2009) between disciplines as well as various college constituencies.

BACKGROUND

Multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) have generated an explosion of interest among educa-

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