

Chapter 13

Debating Across Borders

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, virtual world environments such as Second Life® (SL) have become accepted as platforms for innovative educational activities at many universities in recent years. One such activity includes innovative ways of students coming in contact with other students in so-called telecollaborations. The present case study explores the initial stages in an Action Research process, namely the design and initial implementation of a telecollaborative language learning activity between four universities in Second Life under the EU-funded Avalon project. The chapter describes how theoretical frameworks including the Ecology of Language Learning (van Lier, 2004), the Five Stage Model of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (Salmon, 2004) and Activity Theory (Leont'ev, 1978) were used in order to address different aspects of the design of the course. Based on questionnaire responses from students and observations, the chapter then goes on to evaluate the relative success/failure of the first course trial. Finally, the chapter discusses the implications of the lessons learnt from this pilot project on further developments of the course concept in the action research process, and goes on to discuss implications of the findings for the use of virtual worlds in more mainstream educational settings.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet, and more specifically, social software such as virtual worlds have greatly contributed to global communication over the last decades. In language learning, in particular, this development

presents new exciting possibilities (Kern, 2000; 2006; Thorne, 2000; 2008; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Warschauer, 1998; 1999; 2006). Increased access to digital technologies has meant that online tools such as e-mail, online discussion forums, blogs, wikis, and more recently virtual 3D world platforms such as Second Life®, are increasingly being used in education to bring

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students together. 3D worlds, in particular, offer spaces where genuine communicative acts can take place at a distance, simulating real world activity, but with the advantage that they allow learners from different geographical locations to meet in meaningful authentic communication using the target language in an immersive common space (Deutschmann & Panichi, 2009a; Deutschmann et al., 2009; Stevens, 2006; Nardi, 2006).

One of the traditional challenges in language education has been to provide meaningful contexts for authentic communication. Various approaches to overcoming this problem have led foreign language educators to design and implement pedagogic strategies incorporating internet based communicative activities, such as the use of virtual tandem language exchanges using chat, message boards, discussion forums, blogs and more recently audio-visually synchronous environments such as virtual worlds (see Campbell, 2003 and Dieu, 2004, for example). In bringing together learners from different language backgrounds, on-line environments, such as SL, increase the scope for cross-cultural interaction to the extent that the target language becomes the only viable option for meaningful communication. If, in addition, tasks are designed in such a way that the information needed is contained in the knowledge capital of the student group so that the students themselves become the source of the course content, two of the potential problems related to second language learning situations are addressed: motivation for using the foreign language and subject relevance. Virtual worlds in language education can thus go towards answering needs claims made by researchers such as Warschauer (1997:487) who “demands” that students be given the opportunity to “conduct actively ‘meaningful tasks and solve meaningful problems in an environment that reflects their own personal interests as well as the multiple purposes to which their knowledge will be put in the future’”. However, conducting this type of international collaboration within the framework of set curricula and timetables can be challenging. In addition, there are technological

challenges that arise, particularly when dealing with openly accessible tools located outside the institutional systems and fire-walls.

In this study, the first stages of an Action Research process to develop a telecollaborative language learning activity between four universities under the EU-funded project *Avalon* (Access to Virtual and Action Learning live ONline) will be described. Action Research, a “framework for thinking systematically about what happens in social situations, implementing action for change and monitoring and evaluating the effects of the action with a view to continuing development” (Hudson, Owen & van Veen, 2006:581), has been used extensively as a method for designing, developing and evaluating social situations such as collaborative learning activities, and is the key method of design used under the Avalon framework. This chapter will describe how different theories and models have been used as tools in the initial stages of design of a telecollaborative course (*Avalon Debating*) in order to enhance the language learning outcomes and to foresee and solve potential problems that may arise during the course activity. These theories include the Ecology of Language Learning (van Lier, 2004), the Five Stage Model of CSCL (Salmon, 2004) and Activity Theory (Leont’ev, 1978). The chapter will also evaluate the second stage of the Action Research process, namely the first implementation, in order to estimate the relative success/failure of the design and the reasons for this. Finally, the last part of the chapter will critically discuss the use of innovative technology for this type of set-up in light of the findings. What were the advantages and problems encountered and how can those be addressed, and most importantly, what were the real learning outcomes? Here institutional goals will be viewed against the goals of the designers of the course and the problems arising when these do not match will be pointed to. The chapter will also evaluate the implications of collaborative learning in virtual worlds for university language education at large.

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