

Chapter 50

The Prospects for Teaching in Virtual Worlds

Gianni Panconesi
For.com, Italy

ABSTRACT

The aims of this project were to develop the participants' skills and knowledge in educational design of Virtual World teaching, in management and construction of virtual objects and learning environments with examples of learning activities in Virtual worlds; to develop their capacity and confidence using Internet and its available resources, their knowledge of 3D environment and its usage for creating new learning scenarios, their knowledge of learning methods, good practices and lesson planning adopted in the Virtual worlds; to identify and assess the effectiveness of the results of the various activities carried out inworld to plan strategies, activities and resources for learning in the various subjects; to integrate the Virtual worlds as an innovative tool in daily teaching. During the course, teachers were also involved in developing a Project Work, experimenting subsequently with the students and evaluating the didactic use in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

This paper talks about my experience as an e-moderator in AVATAR Course, a two-year research project (November 2009/2011) funded with support by the European Commission, Lifelong Learning Programme, Comenius, as an expert in Virtual worlds, Instructional Designer and ICT teacher.

Promoting the utilization of ITC is on the agenda in secondary schools throughout Europe, the Avatar project had the goal of raising the utiliza-

tion level of ITC in education, providing teachers with new methodological and pedagogical tools to introduce virtual learning environments in their teaching programs, in particular Virtual worlds. (Schwartzbacher & Guida 2011)

These environments represent a didactical tool that can engage and motivate students, and at the same time improve the quality of their learning process, and stimulate cooperation, reflection and learning by doing.

A virtual world is a 3D digital environment where users, through their avatars, can interact,

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creating and utilizing objects and communicating with text, images, gestures, sounds and three-dimensional representations. Virtual worlds represents a new powerful v-learning platform for teaching, offering a wide range of tools for social interaction, innovation in education and for encouraging active participation from students. Virtual worlds can be adapted to different didactical needs and can operate beyond the limits of the traditional classroom where certain tasks can be difficult to accomplish because of economical or spatial issues (AA.VV. 2009).

V-Learning promotes students' responsibility, allowing them to personalize their own learning path, offering both the simplicity and immediateness of online courses and the interactivity and immersivity of 3D Virtual worlds.

Project activities have been carried out by 120 secondary school teachers in Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy, Spain and Great Britain, with participation as coordinator of FOR.COM (Italy), Free University (Bulgaria), University of Southern Denmark, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Spain), University of Hertfordshire (England), Information Design FH Joanneum University of Applied Sciences (Austria). The results reported in terms of skills are referred to level 5 of the European Qualification Framework (EQF).

The primary aim of the course is to consider how the features of a 3D environment can be applied to give the best support in reaching the learning objectives for students. The results show a good match between the needs of the beneficiaries and the labor market, which requires transversal skills such as communication in foreign languages, digital skills, initiative and innovative patterns of behavior in the social contexts.

Manage the connections between the attendees both on the e-learning platform and in SecondLife, adopting G. Salmon's model (Salmon, 2004) to promote interaction and communication through modeling, participation and construction of knowledge and expertise.

Introducing a tool as virtual worlds, new methodologies come into use, extending practice beyond the boundaries of traditional education delivered in verbal and textual way, involving students and teachers in an immersive laboratory teaching experience (Barker, Haik & Bennet, 2008)

Most efforts was applied to involve participants already experienced on virtual worlds to share with others colleagues their expertise keeping all connected to prevent the abandonment of the Course as well adopting measures to avoid identification of the two roles of facilitator and tutor.

An accurate analysis of attendees' posts in the fora and a systematic observation of their behavior in the 3D world made me aware day by day that they feel comfortable with their tasks or, sometimes, that someone was asking for an additional help.

Participants were asked to fill in a self-assessment form at the end of each module indicating whether they have acquired the skills and knowledge relevant to that module. Relevant knowledge and skills that have been acquired outside the AVATAR course can also be listed. Participants receive a certificate upon active participation in the course.

BACKGROUND

To acquire skills and knowledge through socio-constructivist learning, the course applied three learning methods: cooperative learning, learning through reflecting, and learning by doing. I set up group activities to allow the attendees to learn from each other in an environment that could enhance formal and informal learning, to make them to reflect on their own learning activity, allowing them to define and pursue personal goals, relevant to themselves, exploring the possibilities offered by the virtual worlds. I shared myself as an expert on Metaverse and e-learning and v-learning

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