

## Chapter 6

# Visual Learning in the Virtual World: The Hidden Curriculum of Imagery in Second Life

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Humans rely heavily on their sense of vision and learn from didactic images within their environments. For this reason, in traditional educational environments, educators care about visual representation. However, as today's technology brings images to wider audiences with diverse cultural backgrounds in the virtual world global community, the process of automatic cognition helps people build new knowledge based on prior regional experience. Therefore, when educators employ a technology like Second Life to deliver education, the whole virtual world can be seen as a school. Although most research participants agreed that the imagery in Second Life is fictional, the data shows that users do learn from imagery in the virtual world.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Images have always played a significant role in human lives. Since the early cave drawings, people have used images to “represent, make meaning of, and convey various sentiments about nature, society, and culture as well as to represent imaginary worlds and abstract concepts” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2004, p. 13). The audience for these early images was generally limited to those few who had the same cultural background as the image

creators and understood the meaning intended by the image creators. However, due to the advancement of technology, images are now more easily produced and more widely disseminated. From print to movies, images have changed from static to motion. From movies to television, moving images have changed from a localized viewing to national and worldwide broadcasts. From television to computers, moving images have changed from being viewed by audiences to being created by them. From computers to the virtual worlds (like

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SecondLife), moving images have gone from being created by a single source to being collaborative ongoing endeavors. As today's technology brings images to wider audiences with diverse cultural backgrounds, the exchange of these images is "challenging many conventional wisdoms about the seemingly transparent relationships between images and meaning, mind and thought, as well as culture and identity" (Burnett, 2004, p. xv). Williams (2006) adds that "images generated through the physical eye or the mind's eye or by metaphor influence cognitive and behavioral processes before and beyond the process of reason. The integration of intuitive visual knowing with rational cognitive processes generates expressions of whole-mind cognition" (p. 32). As advanced technology and human desire come together, images become even more important today.

Because people may misunderstand others through stereotyped images, stereotyping is another serious issue that should be considered. "A stereotype is a generalization based on inadequate or incomplete information, because one must select among available information about a person, place, or situation, there is no choice but to make judgments on incomplete or inadequate information" (Stern & Robinson, 1994, p. 44). Despite its potential for misinformation, stereotyping is a necessary means of building up people's knowledge and understanding of images. Without stereotypes, when a partly unfamiliar thing is mentioned, people will be unable to create an image, and the communication will fail. For instance, when people are talking about "Asian," a typical Asian face appears in their mind. With this image in mind, people can start a conversation. Without this image, people will not be able to start the conversation because they have no idea about what Asian is.

For Dake (1999), "Visual mind is more than a communication system. Visual mind is also a valuable cognitive system" (p. 9). Through human beings' visual sense, people are not only watching,

looking, and seeing, but they are also learning from what they see. "Reality is constructed from what we sense based on our experience, emotional condition, beliefs, and so forth" (Miller & Burton, 1994, p. 66). Human perception of the virtual world also follows this theory. The first time people see a new thing, they may not notice it. However, if that new thing is a very noticeable visual image, they may have emotional feelings about it and even be curious about it. If they do notice an image the first time, when they see it a second time, they may not notice it or they may feel excited about it because they have seen this image before. If this image does not have a strong connection with them, after several times, their feelings about this image will substantially decrease. In other words, people's way of seeing is not consistent because different time, place, personal experiences and emotional conditions influence how people look images, people may get used to the images they perceive easily, without really noticing them.

## **VISUAL COMMUNICATION**

The difference between historical communication theory (into the 1990s) and reader response theory depends on active reading or viewing and construction of meaning (Freedman, 2003). Visual communication requires three factors: addresser, content, and addressee (Morgan & Welton, 1992). Successful communication requires the active participation of both addresser and addressee (Morgan & Welton, 1992). The result, or how well addressees understand the message, depends on how the addresser gives the message, through what kind of media, with what content, as well as where, when, and how the addressees receive the message. As Corner and Hawthorn note, "communication studies is about how human meanings are made through the production and reception of various types of sign. It is about visual and

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