

Chapter 11

Teaching Social Skills in Virtual Worlds: A Primer for Extending Existing Social Science Education to Business Management

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ABSTRACT

The process of teaching business is rather complex, as it inherently combines a large number of different tasks, approaches, and techniques. On the one hand, business students have to be taught the basics of rational decision-making, accounting, business planning, and other similar “hard” topics. On the other hand, however, they also have to be prepared to deal with other humans and their myriad diverging desires. In this chapter, the authors propose that some inherently immersive virtual worlds can be used as educational sandboxes that allow business students to practice their business tools. They provide a set of examples as to the specific kinds of knowledge they can attain and practice in the virtual environment, and conclude with sample lesson plans for enterprising professors.

INTRODUCTION

Innovative approaches for teaching business and management extend beyond the traditional textbook assignment. Puffer's (2004) *International Management: Insights from Fiction and Practice*, for example, juxtaposes fictional prose to busi-

ness articles as a means of illustrating complex lessons. Kameda's “Englishes” in *Cross-Cultural Business Communication* (2004) presents facts and figures about the use of English in the business world followed by strategic recommendations about communicating with non-native speakers. In the same volume, Nobel Prize winning author

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Gabriel García Márquez's *One of These Days* (2004) captures the power dynamics between a small town dentist and a notorious Mayor with a mouth abscess. Both pieces are suitably thought provoking. "Englishes" highlights a practical concern that professors can easily use for testing students' problem solving abilities; how would a student, for example, reconstruct a business' communication culture for ease of international discourse? *One of These Days* inspires a multi-level approach. Rather than a simple tale of a man with a toothache, *One of These Days* asks the reader to consider the nature of power and authority within the framework of a fictional interaction. In a classroom, both professors and students would then be tasked with applying the observations to real-world business scenarios.

Other approaches infuse new media practices with traditional pedagogy. Russow's *Digital Technology in Teaching International Business* explores a variety of ways in which modern computing, the Internet, and digital resources are changing the classroom. For example, Agami's *Using Internet Resources in Teaching Financial Reporting and Analysis of Multinational Enterprises* (2003) lauds the availability of digital corporate financial information through the Internet and explores the advantages and disadvantages of using these resources. *Using Information Technology to Promote Multi-Cultural Case Teaching: A Pedagogical Framework* (Benbunan-Fich & Stoeberl, 2003) argues for utilizing the latest computer mediated communication technologies for bringing together internationally diverse groups of students and teachers to work on collaborative projects. Finally, Miller's (2003) *Teaching Business Strategy for an Emerging Economy: An Internet-Based Simulation* refers to a computer simulation designed to teach MBA students about analyzing a (fictional) company's entry into an emerging economy.

This chapter focuses on what we consider one most innovative methods for teaching business management: participation in virtual worlds.

VIRTUAL WORLDS

Edward Castronova (2007), economist and leader in the field of virtual world research, defines virtual worlds as "massive multiuser online environments where millions of people live out a collective fantasy existence" (p. 5). World of Warcraft, Second Life, and Eve Online are only some of the more popular computer generated realities where millions of people from around the world participate in activities or otherwise socialize with one another. Because of the investment of time, emotion, energy, and skill of the participants, virtual worlds (as further discussed and expanded upon below) are an ideal tool for teaching.

Authors such as Shaffer (2006) and Gee (2007), for example, describe how the combination of computers, simulations, games, and interactions with others (both virtually and in real life) can improve learning. In our own research (Herrera & Margitay-Becht, 2008; Herrera & Margitay-Becht, 2010b), we discuss how student participation in virtual worlds as a core assignment for our respective classes actually improved students' retention and application of key economic ideas or anthropological theories. We also observed and analyzed how the collaborative nature of virtual world exercises strengthened group dynamics. Similarly, other scholars suggest that virtual worlds may also be useful in business where "groups of employees...must accomplish their tasks by working with teammates who are physically dispersed" (Bowers, Smith, Cannon-Bowers, & Nicholson, 2008, p. 408). Bowers et al. (2008) utilize the specific virtual world of Second Life for illustrating how virtual environments improve the "behaviors" (p. 413), "attitudes" (p. 416), and "cognitive performance" (p. 418) of teams who are not in the same physical location.

We argue that the dual strengths of the virtual world business education are in the 1) immersion into initially unknown multicultural situations and 2) immersion of students into an environment where every participant is invested in the world and the outcomes.

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