Chapter 27
Supervising Higher Degree Research (HDR) Candidates at a Distance:
What Do Emerging Virtual World Technologies Have to Offer?

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ABSTRACT

New information and communication technologies provide opportunities and challenges for teachers. Emerging virtual world technologies, such as Second Life, are a current example of this. Early adopters and innovators are currently exploring what these technologies offer specific cohorts of students, such as the distance higher degree by research (HDR) candidate. This chapter explores the experiences of three educators and four HDR candidates using virtual worlds as part of the supervisory process. Each case study explores the potentials and pitfalls of the medium from the individual's perspective, and suggests solutions to overcoming some of the challenges. Subsequent thematic analysis of the case studies helps to support the field of literature on using virtual worlds in formal education. Demonstrating the potential merit of virtual worlds to support the HDR candidate, the chapter concludes with a range of possible research directions for this new and exciting field of study.

INTRODUCTION

Space, time, place and access to resources are the four tyrannies of participation in higher education. In order to overcome these barriers, students enrol via distance modes to undertake their qualifications, be these undergraduate courses, graduate certificates and diplomas, through to higher degrees by research. A fifth tyranny that may be encountered after enrolment is the feeling of isolation reported by many distance students which, in turn, can lead to non-completions.

New information and communication technologies provide both opportunities and challenges for teachers. While there is an array of existing media that are being used to help to facilitate these processes, emerging virtual world technologies, such as Second Life, are currently being noted as having the potential to overcome the many challenges surrounding participation in formal education (Willems, 2009). Early adopters and innovators are currently exploring what these mediums offer specific cohorts of students, such as the distance higher degree by research (HDR) candidates.

This chapter examines a specific subset of students engaged with distance education as it considers the benefits and challenges of using virtual worlds such as Second Life for higher degree by research supervision. It explores the experiences of three educators and four HDR candidates who use virtual worlds as part of the supervisory process. Each case study explores the potentials and pitfalls of the medium from the individual's perspective and suggests solutions to overcoming some of the challenges. Subsequent thematic analysis of the case studies helps bolster the literature concerned with the use of virtual worlds in formal education. In addition to demonstrating the potential merit of virtual worlds to support the HDR candidate, this chapter concludes with a range of suggested research directions for this new and exciting field of study.

MEDIA, MUVES, SECOND LIFE AND DISTANCE HDR SUPERVISIONS

One of the challenges with distance supervision across geographical or time zone differences is finding a compatible technology between supervisor and student for communication purposes (Orr, 2010) encompassing the various aspects of the HDR supervision process. There are many media that can potentially be used to for distance HDR supervisions with each supporting different kinds of teaching and learning experiences. Laurillard (2002) classifies the media for teaching and learning into five principal groups. These five groups are the narrative, interactive, communicative, adaptive and productive forms of media. In terms of the DE HDR candidate, examples of the types of methods and technologies that are representative of each form of media include: written documents and/or accompanying comments for the narrative media; web resources are examples of interactive media; communicative media include telephone, email, audio, formal video conferencing and Skype; virtual laboratories and simulations are examples of adaptive media; and productive media involve expressive opportunities ranging from the writing of essays through to the creation of a model. These principal media forms (Laurillard, 2002, p. 90) are summarised in Table 1 (below).

In terms of the DE HDR supervisory process, each of these media will provide different learning and support opportunities. Skype has recently become more frequently used in DE HDR supervisions as it can integrate a variety of media simultaneously: text in the form of instant messaging, voice, real-time video images, file transfer and desktop sharing (Bonfiglio, Mellia, Meo, & Rossi, 2009). Though this free technology has transformed the face of distance supervision, it does have some limitations. One of the main challenges reported is that even though users can see and communicate with each other, users still feel separate and disengaged, with the feeling of distance between users perpetuated.

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