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Seeking planning permission to build a Gothic cathedral on a virtual island

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Seeking Planning Permission to Build a Gothic Cathedral on a Virtual Island

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Schome Park was a virtual island, set in the middle of a sunlit sea beyond which none of its inhabitants could wander. Like all islands, it had a limited set of resources and so the islanders had worked out a system of local governance for allocating these. Most prized was permission to use prims, a kind of all-purpose material, to construct an exciting new building, perhaps the site for an event or new community facility – a club, a cooperative store, garden, race track, restaurant, or something equally appealing. One day, a newcomer who'd recently landed from the USA onto this island dominated by Brits, approached the planning permission committee. Carefully observant of legal and procedural niceties, he set out his request, in writing, as required. He wanted to build a Gothic Cathedral. In many old-timers' views, this was a bad idea, something which threatened the community's history and ethos, perhaps to the core. A lively debate ensued.

We, the writers of this chapter, were staff members in this extraordinarily lively and unpredictable online project centred on a virtual world. The fourth author was the director of the project. This was the first European closed i.e. 'protected' Teen Second Life Educational project, which ran for 13 months from 2007-8. It was centred upon activities in a virtual world, accompanied by other online communication domains including wiki and asynchronous fora. Since elements at least of the project were open 24/7 and several hundred people participated – for varying durations and intensity of engagement, the project had such an enormous variety of events and interactions that it would be impossible for anybody involved to witness or even have any knowledge about everything that occurred. Accordingly, as we've argued elsewhere, although certain kinds of overviews have been written (e.g. Twining, 2009; Twining & Footring, 2010) there is also a place in analysis of the project for deploying a 'team ethnography' approach (Creese, 2011). This is an attempt to understand events and practices through accepting the existence of a "multiplicity of co-existing and sometimes directly competing points of view" (Bourdieu, 1999: 3) within the project, working together to construct a polyvocal account, remaining aware of the unfinalisable nature of any understandings. Since the project can be characterised as a lifelike flow of interactions and events online, more like life on a large island indeed than the bounded characteristics of a more standard educational intervention project, a multivocal ethnography appears to us an appropriate approach to studying the project, especially now that we take a retrospective examination (the project was also

characterised by concurrent research methods that are not the focus of attention here). We have together selected examination of the 'Gothic Cathedral debate' – our own construction – as a 'telling case' for this chapter. We will return both to methodology and to our selection of this case below.

Before introducing the debate in more detail, it is vital, as within any ethnographic approach, to give a sociohistorical background to the setting. We have to explain the background to the project in the physical world and to introduce some of the social and cultural aspects of the environment we are examining.

Schome Park: a brief cultural history

The Schome Park programme was set up under the auspices of a voluntary umbrella community of educationalists, young people, parents, teachers and anyone who wanted to join online discussions about the future of education in the twenty-first century. This online community has since 2005 been based at the Open University, UK (a distance learning university with a strong record of principles of high quality learning and teaching, openness and innovation). The word 'Schome' derived from an early characterisation of 'not school, not home' that, while not being a simple rejection of both those domains, suggested that the firm boundaries between them need to be shaken. The shared aim has been to investigate and attempt to enact new models of education, centred upon a cradle to grave ethos, providing participants with increased range, responsibility and control of their learning and greater opportunities for collaboration. From the perspective of the director of the project (Peter) it was rooted in the experience of participating in an eStrategy Implementation Review team (Twining et. al. 2006) which led to vision-building activities in schools (Rix and Twining, 2007; Sheehy and Bucknall, 2008) and an identification of key elements of what the UK's future education system should provide. A simplified version of that identification summary appears as Figure 1 below.

Insert figure 1 about here.

Schome was established with the aim of creating a new form of educational system designed to overcome the problems associated with current education systems in order to meet the needs of society and individuals in the 21st century. Technology is seen not only as a tool to support and extend existing practices but also as having the potential to transform ways of representing the world and of supporting learning.

In 2006 the Schome community decided to explore the potential of virtual worlds, considering their capacity to act as spaces in which visions of future practices and

pedagogies can be built and experienced, making it "possible to construct, investigate and interrogate hypothetical worlds" (Squire, 2006, p. 19). With funding from a number of organisations at various stages of the project and a great deal of further voluntary input (see Gillen et al., 2009; Sheehy, Ferguson & Clough, 2010; Twining, 2009 for more details) the Schome Community decided to use Teen Second Life, the youth version of the virtual world Second Life, at the time with an uncontestable claim to being the most technologically advanced 3D simulation without intrinsic goals; (i.e. not a rule-governed game such as World of Warcraft). This made it necessary for the community participants ourselves to design and enact all activities on the island (later two islands) which were the location for the project. Schome Park was the first 'closed' (ie with access only to members registered in the project) educational project in Europe. Although at the beginning of the project a few resources were 'imported' as it were from elsewhere in Second Life, once the project was open then it was up to participants to design activities, establish ground rules and construct community practices, including in the various communicative domains as needs to be explained. Having downloaded the client application, via their 2D computer screens, participants interacting remotely were in actuality located in homes, schools, workplaces or after-school clubs; mostly in the UK but with some in the USA. With a mixture of staff-led and student-led activities that many people who tried out the project found exciting, a distinctive community emerged with an ethos that one of us, Peter Twining, the project director, has previously characterised in terms entirely dichotomous to a school regime; see figure 2 below.

Insert figure 2 about here.

In particularly crediting Figure 2 to the director of the project, we are not seeking to disassociate we, the other authors, from it. On the contrary, the Schome ethos and aims are well encapsulated here for all of us. But still, in capturing a specific text and its articulation in just this form, we want to spring from it, drawing attention to how the culture of any community is constantly in flux. With Heath and Street we suggest it is fruitful to think of culture as a verb rather than a noun: an "ever-shifting active process of meaning-making" (Heath and Street, 2008: 7); thus newcomers to the community, for example, whatever their scale of knowledge about Schome before entering, will have at best an emergent sense of the project's aims and features as understood by the director and core participants. They, and we indeed, will shape and refine understandings of the Schome culture in ways at least partly dependent on initial interactions as well as developing interactions and a growing sense of shared community history.

Thus, as a brief but linked diversion we would like to remark at this point that the kind and quality of initial interaction was a constant challenge with which the project grappled throughout; if it was possible for a project entrant to 'land' inworld

at any time 24/7 how could we ensure that their first experience was a worthwhile one rather than of limited interest or even offputting? This difficulty was a strong factor influencing the brevity of participation of many entrants, and is a common issue for virtual worlds in general (*relevant ref*)

In the Schome project, both individuals and groups joined the project at various points during the three phases. The particular debate focussed upon in this chapter occurred during the third phase, when school-based groups of students joined, some working with a teacher in an after-school club, others using Schome Park as part of lessons during school time. Their introductions to Schome were designed so that to some degree at least they understood they were joining an already well established community of practice: "a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavour and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them (Wenger, 2001: 1).

Background to the Gothic Cathedral proposal and context for analysis

The immediate context to the debate over the proposed Gothic cathedral is that a high-school group from the USA entered the SPP with their teacher. In this computer class, one opportunity among others that was given to them was to earn credit through building in Schome. They were given to understand however that any building proposal had to be put to the Schommunity before being undertaken. This was owing to limits on resources, including building blocks (known as prims) and space for building, and a shared community ethos that such projects should be outlined and agreed in essence before construction. (For more information and analysis as to the interactions between these groups, including discussion as to the conceptual relations between network and community as enacted in practice, see Ferguson et al. 2011).

In this chapter we seek to explore what happened in this debate. As will be shown, we consider the debate to be a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984) in that rather than being a 'typical case' – which in our compass here might be a delightful demonstration of how wonderfully well Schome matched up to its aspirations and characterisations in practice, we find the events around the Gothic Cathedral to be a less comfortable and yet more fruitful instantiation of Schome life. We seek to analyse the debate as virtual literacies in practice, exploring the entwined relationships between communicative domain, participants and meaning-making practices. We recognise that 'the debate' is our own construction, in that in order to narrow down the scope of analysis to something practicable, we focus on the main location for communications about the Gothic Cathedral proposal, one specific thread of the asynchronous forum. It would be better to make a brief consideration of other

communicative domains where the debate occurred since the forum was so entwined with other interactions in practice, but beyond the scope of work in this chapter. Here our focus is on an extrapolated dataset of 90 postings, more than sufficiently challenging to analysis in its range and content. Before beginning to examine that data however, it is necessary to explain its place within the various communicative domains of the project.

As was briefly mentioned above, the project was centred on an island, or, as the project expanded, an island archipelago, known as Schome Park. Participants in the project interacted and communicated through a pseudonymised identity, both on the simulated island "inworld" and through other digital modes of communication. Inworld, the mode of interaction is through an avatar which interacts with the environment, including other avatars and objects, giving the illusion of three dimensional space. All movement and communicative practices are controlled by the individual who controls their avatar via their keyboard. The effects projected include movement by walking, running or flying; communicating through written synchronous 'chat' and instant messaging; and building new objects and making them do things, through using the software that includes a programming language. At the same time communicative domains outside Second Life were extremely important, especially including the project's wiki and forum. As the community of practice developed and learned which domains were most appropriate and effective according to various purposes, the wiki became increasingly specialised for recording events and for announcements of crystallised plans for future events. The forum was the site for a great diversity of purposes and indeed was the communicative domain most engaged in by project members, that is to say more time was spent engaging with it even than inworld. At first glance that seems perhaps a little odd, as the Second Life islands were the central focus for activity. However, the forum was even more popular for two reasons. The first is that it was relatively easy to access. Any participant could access their forum account from any computer, so if for example one was on the internet, during a school break for example and using a shared computer without a Second Life account, it was easy to take a quick look at the forum. Secondly, it was well suited to discussions including asynchronous and even synchronous planning of events inworld. Although there were many other communication domains relating to the project, for example blogs maintained by participants under their project psdeuonyms but hosted outside the project to give one example, our ethnographic endeavour as a whole is constituted by the analysis of the project's virtual literacies, visible as textual records of chatlogs, wiki pages and asynchronous fora, plus fieldnotes and image captures. Hence, since in this project, where staff members interacted with students only online[i] we tend to describe our approach as a virtual literacy ethnography (Gillen, 2009).

Centring on the specific forum thread, which for simplicity we will from now on refer to as the 'debate', we worked to identify the span of messages that were the its

focus, settling on 90 posts posted between 11 April and 21 April 2008. We carried out a small amount of editing to remove some material relating to other topics; since the thread was so focussed in practice this was relatively easy to do. We did not edit out material where any of us felt it might have a bearing on the debate. Our approach to analysis is to illustrate the beginnings of the debate, to begin to discuss some of the issues immediately raised, and then to offer further analysis of a sample of postings.

The forum debate

Figure 3 shows the original posting in full, except that the name of the avatar, ie participant's pseudonym and that of the thread on which the message appeared have been obliterated. This is the first posting in our dataset; it was actually the 7th posting in its thread, but from this point postings were centrally concerned with the debate. Although some of our writings about the project in the past have featured participants' (avatars') names, ie. project pseudonyms, in accordance with consent given, other of our writings have as this paper further introduced a new level of anonymity.

Insert figure 3 about here.

Applying Katsav and Reed's (2004) approach to the analysis of argumentation, we can identify here three clearly identifiable arguments as follows:

Argument 1. I propose that I will build a cathedral. Therefore I need some things.
Argument 2. I suggest that there is a lack of time to do this. Therefore I propose it will be done gradually.
Argument 3. I suggest that I will open on May 26th. Therefore the significance of this opening should be marked by an event.

Each of these are fleshed out in more detail. For example the things that are needed in argument 1 consist of blueprints of actual cathedrals i.e. materials from elsewhere that will inform the design activity; materials – here 'textures' that can be used in the build activity and thirdly suggestions for a location, or position to build it.

Taking a sociocultural framework to online discourse, that we relate strongly to a more general perspective on human communication, we can broaden our understanding of the posting further. Discourse is always mediated action (Scollon, 2001) which is to say that communications are always affected by the material conditions of the communication channel, and the cultural understandings of involved participants. As Haraway (1997: 218) proposes, discourses are "not just

words: they are material-semiotic practices." We will have more to say about the material aspects of these postings below, but we can immediately point out that the posting is constituted by templated aspects and newly written elements. The structured template appears at the top, giving the posting precise temporal and spatial coordinates, while the left hand column gives some details about the author, (whom we shall call TA), including facts which to a practiced eye, ie. core member of the community of practice, give clues as to the status of the author, as relative newcomer. Significant is the little box with 'offline' next to it. Although in reproductions such as here, it will be shown as a blank square labelled 'offline', during the life of the project, and specifically those April days in 2008 being revisited here, when a participant read a posting there might well have been an illuminated green square here and the label 'online'. This would mean that as one read, the author was actually online at the same time. If one were quick to post a response, it was likely that the original author would see that posting, and thus the forum was effectively operating as a synchronous channel. This is of course one of many aspects to communication that is occluded to any subsequent research, but our knowledge as participants enables us to know that this synchronicity, yet persistence, was often a feature in the intensity of certain exchanges. It is also a superb example of newly flexible ways of combining reading and writing practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Kress, 2010)

Every communication is not understood anew; all communications are crafted towards a sense of explicit and implicit audience, against a background of values and attitudes (Volosinov, 1995). This first posting can be seen as including other elements than the arguments as identified above, indeed words that appear to indicate awareness that there may be elements to the proposal potentially troublesome to the community. In particular the idea of the 'universal service' is recognised as potentially problematic, yet the very act of recognising a potential problem, picked up again at the end of the post, appears a tactful calibration to potential difficulties.

It was not enough to carry through the proposal. Within three minutes a response appeared; see figure 4.

Insert figure 4 about here.

We must remark at this point that it was a difficult decision to make – to decide whether it was sufficient to quote the direct response of this responder, whom we shall call TB, to the initial proposal:

"that would take a long time etc and I'm no sure if this is the best or most PC thing to do best to get a good community thread on this one"

Displaying that response in the context TB designed, in Figure 4, gives a somewhat different interpretive frame. We can read that TB has chosen to respond to TA's previous initiating post together with another posted by somebody else. He (we use the word he in accordance with our impression gained over the life of the project, but gender ascription is always tentative, just in practice, we found, impossible to avoid) groups it together with another proposal that he is also negative towards. This might make his objection less personalised, less hostile perhaps – although of course this is only one possible reading. TB does choose to select the size of quotation, in one case the whole post, in the first not, which makes it clear what he is responding to. Finally, although negative, he does not present his negative response as a putative last word, but rather suggests further discussion might be useful. As we have already mentioned, the result was a total of 90 postings in 11 days. This intensity, and the broad range of topics covered, presents a considerable challenge to analyse relatively briefly. Since the nature of a team ethnography implies some willingness to be open about matters of process, we can say that approaches considered, even piloted, have included an identification of all arguments and an attempt to map their relations; this rapidly revealed itself to be completely unmanageable, including when considered against the affordances of book pages or indeed screen presentation. Accordingly, we present a brief exploration of the breadth of debate according to participants and topic sampling.

Figure 5 displays the contributions per participant. Each participant is anonymised through being given a number according to their place in the debate. The student who first brought up the idea that became the focus of the debate is therefore TA, the one who immediately responded to "him" is TB. In this code 'T' stands for teenage participant and A for adult, since this difference was visible to everybody in the project throughout, through a distinct patterning of avatar 'surnames'.

Insert Figure 5 about here.

Figure 5 demonstrates that the debate was widely engaged upon and that furthermore everybody except 3 people found it worth posting to at least a second time. Some people were extremely engaged, these included the original proposer but also the fourteenth teenager to enter the debate. As we will show by more qualitative analysis, this is indicative of the continuing fertility of the debate; it did not feature mere rehashing of established positions set by a small number of combatants. The mean number of contributions per person is 5.29 (SD 4.51) and the median number 3. Adults are fairly minimally involved: AA posted twice and AB just once; again qualitative analysis shows how little their apparent involvement was. Although, of course, even minimal adult involvement may well have suggested to the teenage participants that the thread was being read and monitored in some sense.

Now we turn to considering the content of posts. We decided to briefly describe, quote from and relate to the debate as a whole, every tenth contribution, ie. from number 10, to 20….to 90, having checked that we all agreed that this sampling did result in a reasonably representative selection, according to dimensions of length, strength of relation to surrounding posts and content. We recognise that necessarily the act of describing or summarising the postings has the potential to skew the original intentions of the author or indeed how it might be read, both within the project and later.

Posting 10 – TB4, 194 words long & inclusion of one quotation
This posting is coded as TB4, i.e. it was the fourth posting by TB, who was of course the very first to respond to the TA's initiation.
TB again responds to TA, although this time by responding to a very short extract, in which TA criticises Richard Dawkins, whose views have been introduced into the debate.
TB makes various points in alignment with TB including agreeing that religion should be discussed, violence is wrong and that Gothic architecture can be beautiful, citing York cathedral as an example. He interweaves these agreements with an assertion, backed up with a dictionary definition, that a cathedral building is necessarily associated with religious purposes and states that he does not want a religious building in Schome park. He also adopts a stategy of mitigating the strength of his view by asserting he has no power to stop TA.

Posting 20 – TA4   507 words long & inclusion of one quotation
TA begins by quoting approvingly a contribution to the thread, outside the debate, which describes plans for a beach wedding by two participants, including "a chuppa, used by many Jews during the ceremony." TA moves to the body of his post by declaring he will make a general response to several points made in discussion, rather than taking each up separately. He rejects some notions of compromise that have been raised, making an argument that it would be pointless to build a cathedral without overt religious symbolism, as then it would not be a cathedral. He also objects to people being offended at the notion it necessarily involves religious practices, declaring: "I'm not planning this place as a place to regularly hold services. I was thinking of a sort of all-inclusive "consecration" as an opening, but not to any specific religion. This building's religious presence would be a presence, but it would begin and end at the architecture." He displays attention to the wellbeing of the community, and approval of aspects of the cooperative tone of the debate, in calling it "reasoned, disciplined and intellectual, minus my provocative pass at Mr Dawkins" and proceeds to refine his earlier opinion, then stating: "This was a learning experience, one that never would have happened if discussion of the man was banned." He finishes his post by questioning other cultural presences in Schome Park, for example as to whether the Japanese garden might be perceived as a Shinto presence.

Posting 30 TF4 573 words, divided into 2 sections with a subheading
The first half of the posting is a complex contribution to the debate, arguing that the root of opposition to the proposal is not that people would be offended by having a religious building as such: " I am sure we are all sensible enough not to be offended by a religious building. However, that doesn't mean there aren't other reasons against it, and Political Correctness is standing as a straw man here*. Instead, I think my reasons against it are best explained by Crick, tongue in cheek: "Christianity may be OK between consenting adults in private but should not be taught to young children." Rather, he explains, religion is intensely personal and inappropriate to Schome as potentially invasive. The asterisk leads to the subheading for the second section, which is an extremely well structured argument about the nature of political correctness, synthesising various kinds of evidence and referring to American, Russian and other histories.

Posting 40 TA8 88 words, in 2 parts, interposed with 2 quotations.
In part 1 of his posting, TA responds to a concern about the possibility of using too many prims in his project in a conciliatory fashion, asking for advice and adding (with reference to his computer class agenda): " I do have to make something, though; this IS our final project. 😊" In part 2 he responds to a new enquiry about his reasoning for wanting to build a cathedral: " Originally, it was because 1) the layout is governed enough that I'd have a strong starting point and 2) because of the beauty of religious buildings in that style. Now it's a fight for free expression of ideas." This appears likely, in our view at least, to be a particularly powerful posting as attending to so many community norms and values, including contrasting the relatively freedom, albeit always within certain constraints of the Schome Park Programme and school, the realm with which it is most often (unfavourably) contrasted.

Posting 50 TN3 173 words
Without directly quoting any other postings, TN here clearly locates her posting in the flow of a particular theme as to whether religion should be practiced in Schome Park or not. She expands on a previous posting through disclosing: "I myself am a Christian, I dont make a big thing of it, but in this case I do think I should say that I feel that these places are places in which to worship God, and therefore should not be copied just for recreational purposes. " Finally, she expresses some degree of support with another contributor, who has declared she wishes to leave the project, as she feels strongly against the use of it for school-based assessed work.

Posting 60 TO3 239 words including one quotation and a hyperlink

TO begins by quoting an extract from a posting by TN in which she distinguishes between religion, wars and wars justified by religion, mentioning the Crusades. TO proposes a taxonomy for wars (civil, ideological, expansionist and religious), and taking the Crusades as an example argues that organized religion has often been associated with war. "The idea of an afterlife and of salvation has always been, and will continue to be, a way to persuade otherwise moral people to commit atrocities. That is why I dislike organised religion, and why I think it should have no place in schome." He continues by making a distinction between religion used as justifying wars and distinctive religious leaders and their followers, naming "Abraham, Muhammed, Guru Nanak, or Siddartha Gautama" as proponents of contrary views (implicitly against war). In the second part of his posting he suggests other styles of buildings, including a hyper link to an article on Leuven Town Hall in Wikipedia.

Posting 70 TN11 41 words, spaced out into 3 sections
The content of VN's posting has clear intertextual references to preceding posts, but those have to be read in order to fully understand her brief entries here. For example her first, "I read them…. 😳" responds to an earlier posting by TF who in turn is synthesising some earlier responses and postings including by himself. Indeed, it must be interjected at this point that to describe VN's posting on this occasion would take far longer than the original posting and that, therefore, any notion of 'summarising' is indeed impossible. The second element supports the idea of a vote relating to the proposal (this can be set up as a poll on any thread at any time) and the third extends somebody else's idea that symbolism can be used appropriately in Schome but relating to issues away to religion. Her suggestion " Something about a personal hero. eg. Douglas Adams, and 42 pillars or something similar. Just an example."

Posting 80 TB8 107 words
TB begins by joining a long-running theme in response to TA's proposal; an objection that being set work and graded on it by a teacher is counter to the established Schome ethos. He mitigates any possible offense that might be taken (implicitly, presumably, by the teacher) and praises TA, culminating in the proposition: " For engaging in this debate alone and how well you are presenting your augment etc alone you should get a A*" It's vital to recall that this praise sounds all the more genuine, and one might perhaps say intellectually mature, coming as it does from someone who has opposed the cathedral proposal from the outset. He finishes the post by again arguing secular builds would be better, in his opinion, as religious connotations affect his opinion of any building.

Posting 90 TJ5 199 words in 3 sections, including one quotation
TJ quotes a relatively emotional posting by TA in which he states "I'm feeling pretty freaking persecuted as a religious person". She denies that persecution of anybody because of their religious beliefs can occur in Schome, also stating that any

suggestion to the contrary is insulting. Secondly, she implicitly refers to her position as a 'hero moderator' (visible on the left hand side of her template) to threaten to close the thread down until the project director is available (to mediate). However, in the third part of the posting she continues the theme that has appeared very many times in the debate, of suggesting some kind of amendment to the original proposal, proposing this to be a 'compromise.'

A brief afterword
The debate did not end with Posting 90. It marked a kind of watershed though, in that some of the interwoven themes petered out and others were resolved. TA decided to abandon the Gothic Cathedral idea, and his teacher posted to explain why he had originally encouraged TA and how he had not foreseen the problems that arose, nor indeed felt he had come to a final understanding of them. Here and in other threads and project domains, as well as beyond, references to the debate and themes from it continued to be discussed, but beyond our scope here.

Conclusions

In conclusion then, we would echo the opinion of some of the participants that the debate was rich in multiple ways. Analysis shows how vital it is, when considering literacy practices, to take into account in very precise ways the affordances of the specific domain engaged in. The written, persistent nature of the forum made it possible to maintain several significant arguments in just one discussion. The ability to return to earlier issues, to keep multiple ideas in play and to have the time to develop extremely complex turns in the conversation are all afforded by the medium.   Participants were able to interweave arguments, dip in and out of them, arrange them in new patterns and play on their resonances. The debate simply could not have happened in any other way in another medium and so the qualities of the forum, as creatively taken up by the participants, had a profound effect on how the arguments played out. We offer support then for Haraway's (1997) characterisation of discourses as 'material-semiotic practices' as discussed above.

Yet the debate would be of very limited interest if it merely illustrated the potential affordances of one medium rather than another. Of more significance in the end is the extent to which it clarifies or at least raises significant questions about creating the foundations for the kind of collaborative discussions that are founded in a trusting community, supportive of individuals shaping learning identities in a creative environment (Peachey, 2010). Rethinking educational practice to include more authentic literacy engagements, asynchronous debates that are genuinely meaningful to participants , speak to their concerns and related to genuine opportunities for purposeful activity and indeed creativity, is surely a worthwhile

exercise (Barton, 2007; Ferguson, 2011). How might then such ideas promote reshaping the aims of learning environments, even ultimately institutions of education?

A more sceptical question might legitimately be posed as to whether settling such disputes is relevant 'in the real world.' We are wholeheartedly convinced that, as more and more communication happens online, the capacity to interact online in ways far more sophisticated than the old caricatures of online interaction (flaming, flirting, etc) imply is a vital component of effective professional and personal relations. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, the physical world is waking up to the economic, political and hence legal ramifications of interactions in virtual worlds (Castronova, 2007). Tennesen (2009) argues that it is likely virtual world transactions, even if without commercial currency in the physical world, are likely to come under 'bricks-and-mortar jurisprudence' as they do already in South Korea.

In the end though, we would suggest it is not necessary to accept that because virtual worlds are becoming increasingly recognised as authentic theatres for human interaction that virtual literacies should be valued. Rather that the capacity to build bridges either between communities, or even within communities where divisions of purpose and values suddenly open up into dangerous chasms, fruitfully involves consideration of the complexities involved in communicative practices.

> In communication, members of a community participate in the renewing, the remaking and the transformation of their social environment from the perspective of *meaning*. In the process 'the social' – as entities and forms, as processes and practices – is constantly articulated in (material) semiotic form: the social is re-*calibrated*, re-*registered* with semiotic/cultural resources. (Kress 2010: 34, emphasis as original)

Ever-shifting active processes of meaning-making continually "do" culture, as we find new modes for learning in the pursuit of multiple, entwined goals, in a necessarily social world.

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[i] There were a few occasions where some staff members met some students, including when a few student participants visited the Open University, and when another group met a staff member when participating in the finals of a competition. Many staff members, including for example the first author, never met a student participant offline and the overwhelming majority of students never met any member of staff offline either .